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APATHY
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Impaired emotivity
HYPERPATHY
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Irritability → Fury
Sexual excitement
hypomania
mania
± paranoia
AKATHISIA
(forced movement
Speed, Force, Perseverat
MIMICS
CATATONIC EXCITEMENT
1) Generalized restlessness
2) Movements eg chorea
3) Reflex actions eg Tics, crises
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HIS OWN LIFE

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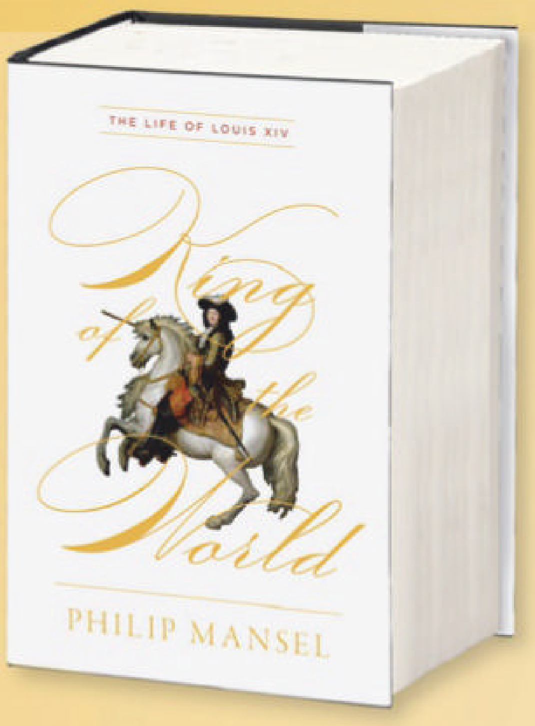
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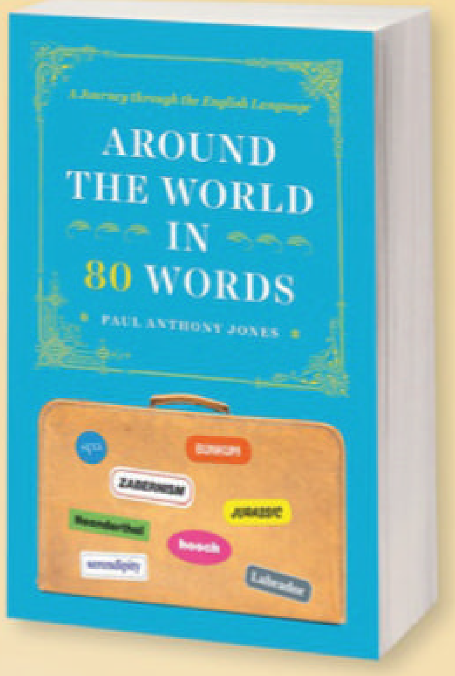
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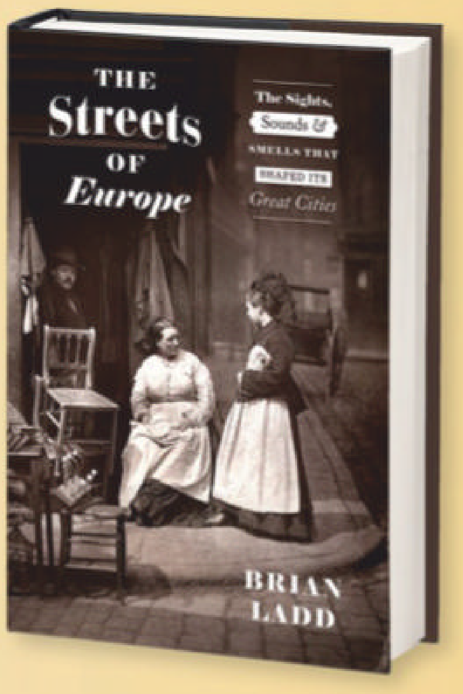
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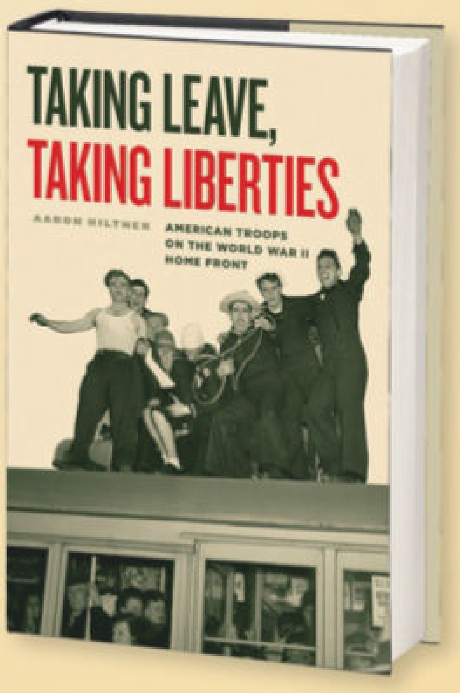
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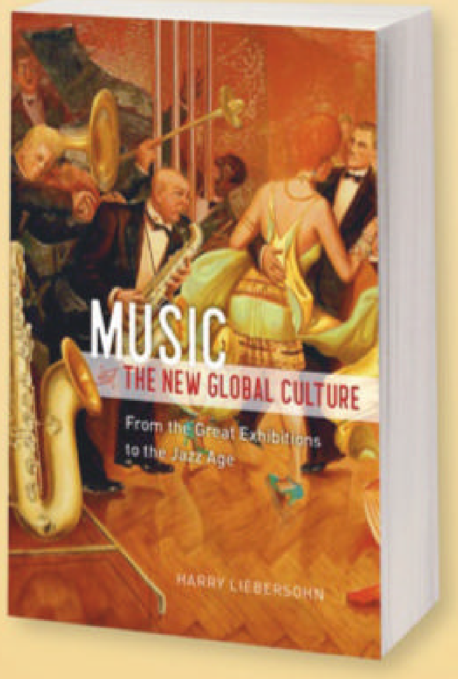
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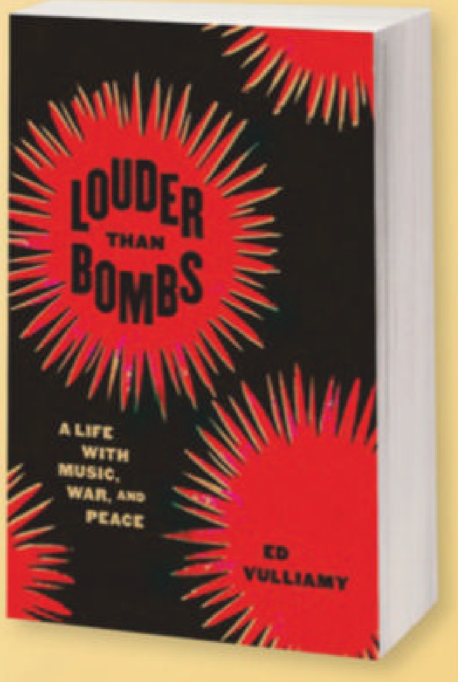
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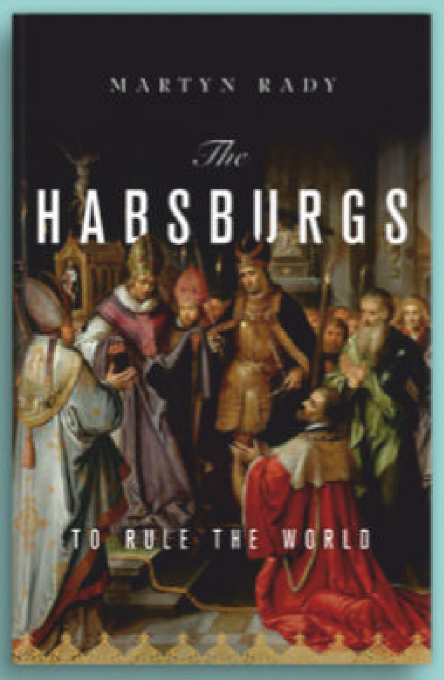

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Our Most Vulnerable Election

Pamela Karlan

Will He Go?:
Trump and the Looming
Election Meltdown in 2020
by Lawrence Douglas.
Twelve, 146 pp., $22.00

Illustration by Tom Bachtell

In October 1884, as a particularly ugly presidential race neared its end, Walt Whitman decided instead of voting to write a poem. “Election Day, November, 1884” argued that the most remarkable feature of the United States was not its stunning natural wonders—not the Mississippi River, nor the limitless prairies, “nor you, Yosemite” (however our current president wants to pronounce it). No, Whitman declared, the “powerfulest scene and show” was “America’s choosing day.” And not because of the men who were selected to govern: “The heart of it not in the chosen—the act itself the main, the quadriennial choosing.” Elections matter because they are a central way in which we constitute ourselves as a nation. In this centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote (at least if they were white, since effective enfranchisement didn’t come to Black citizens in the South until the Voting Rights Act of 1965), voting remains a powerful expression of who counts as a full member of the political community.

When Whitman wrote, the nation was only eight years past the debacle of 1876, during which the winner of the presidency—Rutherford B. Hayes, a Republican—was not determined until two days before the inauguration. Vote suppression, fraud, dishonest counting of the ballots, and the vagaries of state law had led to Florida, Louisiana, Oregon, and South Carolina each sending more than one set of electoral votes to Congress. The Twelfth Amendment, which lays out the process for declaring the winner of a presidential election, proved inadequate to the task of resolving the dispute over which sets to count, not least because the amendment’s language was susceptible to multiple readings, and Democrats controlled the House while Republicans controlled the Senate.

It took a special, jury-rigged electoral commission, hardball behind-the-scenes bargaining, and ultimately a concession by Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden to reach closure. As Lawrence Douglas, a professor of law, jurisprudence, and social thought at Amherst College, observes in *Will He Go?*, that was only the beginning of our woes. The price of the deal that gave the Republicans the presidency was their agreement to end Reconstruction—a decision that haunts us to this day. In Douglas’s words, “Catastrophe was avoided by disaster.”

The United States has had fifty-eight presidential elections since George Washington won a unanimous electoral vote in 1788–1789. Few of them have been as obviously consequential as the election of 2020. That would be true even if it were only about the issues: how America will handle Covid-19, racial inequality, immigration, climate change, foreign relations, economic policy, and judicial appointments depends on whom we choose to lead us next. On each of these questions, there are sharp differences between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. But although we have had many critical elections, none of them since the end of Reconstruction has occurred under anything like the cloud hanging over this quadriennial choosing.

The pandemic has made it harder to recruit poll workers and to keep polling places safe. Millions more Americans will attempt to vote by mail than have ever done so before, and in some states they will face difficulties in applying to get their ballots. So there is genuine concern whether every eligible voter who wants to cast a ballot will succeed in doing so. US intelligence agencies have pointed to renewed Russian efforts to influence the election’s outcome and undermine public confidence in the democratic process. In normal election years, the election legitimates the winner; this time around, the question may well be whether the election itself was legitimate.

Three of the last seven incumbents—Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and George H.W. Bush—were defeated when they ran for a second term. And yet it is inconceivable that a respected scholar like Douglas could have written a book with a title like *Will He Go?* about any of them. In each case, the answer to that question was obvious: once the results were announced, all three men swiftly gave gracious public concession speeches recognizing that the people had spoken. Each praised what Bush, in his remarks, called “the majesty of the democratic system.” Each pledged to cooperate with his successor during the transition period. And after they left office on the date set by section 1 of the Twentieth Amendment, all of them avoided public comment on the next president’s performance. That is because, as Douglas explains, “our political leaders have accepted—and internalized—the norms of the democratic process.”

Not Donald Trump. He has flouted nearly every norm of American political life: using the White House for campaign events, threatening to jail his opponent, calling members of Congress “treasonous” for not applauding his speeches, inviting foreign intervention in our electoral process, undermining the independence of the Justice Department’s prosecutorial decisions, using the presidency to promote his business interests,* praising autocrats while denigrating our allies. He has spent his entire presidency simultaneously attacking and defending the legitimacy of the 2016 election—attacking it on the grounds that his failure to win a majority of the popular vote was due to extensive vote fraud, and defending it from the charge (most recently supported in excruciating detail by the bipartisan Senate Select Committee on Intelligence) that his campaign was entwined with Russian efforts to influence the outcome. And he is firmly launched on a campaign to undermine the legitimacy of the 2020 election as well. Far from wanting all citizens to participate, Trump has admitted that the more people who vote, the less likely he is to win.

One answer to Douglas’s question might be that, yes, Trump surely will go—no later than January 20, 2025, when a second term would end if he won reelection. (The Twenty-Second Amendment declares that “no person shall be elected to the office of the President more than twice.”) But Trump repeatedly flirts with the idea that he should be entitled to a third term. This summer he suggested that after he wins this election he will “go for another four years because they spied on my campaign. We should get a redo of four years.” On the first night of the Republican National Convention, he responded to the crowd’s chant of “four more years” by saying, “If you really want to drive them crazy, you say, ‘Twelve more years.’” In 2018, when Chinese president Xi Jinping had the two-term limit removed from the Chinese Constitution, Trump remarked that it was “great” that Xi could now be president for life, and mused that “maybe we’ll have to give that a shot someday.”

Shrugging off these repeated remarks as jokes misses the point: as Sigmund Freud long ago observed, what an individual chooses to joke about can reveal a good deal about his inner life. Trump’s “impulses and sympathies are clearly authoritarian,” Douglas writes, and he “seeks power simply to keep himself in the public eye; or to put it differently, the only power Trump really craves is the power to command attention.” Elections are for him nothing more than a way to serve his own interests.

The central argument of *Will He Go?* is that Trump’s pathologies intersect with some distinctive features of the US electoral system in a particularly dangerous way. So before we can think about the scenarios Douglas sketches to suggest just how he might not go, we need to understand the architecture of our presidential election system.

To select the nation’s chief executive, individual citizens cast a ballot for the candidate they prefer, but those votes actually operate to select members of an Electoral College. These “electors” are apportioned among the states, with the number for each state being its senators (always two) plus its representatives (depending on its population, with a minimum of one; California currently has the most, at fifty-three). (Under the Twenty-Third Amendment, the District of Columbia also gets three electors.) The 538 electors then cast ballots for president and vice-president.

If a candidate receives an undisputed majority of the Electoral College votes, he or she is the winner. With the exception of the elections of 1800, 1824, and 1876, this is how our presidents and vice-presidents have been chosen (with an asterisk for Vice Presidents Ford and Rockefeller, who were chosen through the nomination and confirmation process of section 2 of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment—Ford to fill the

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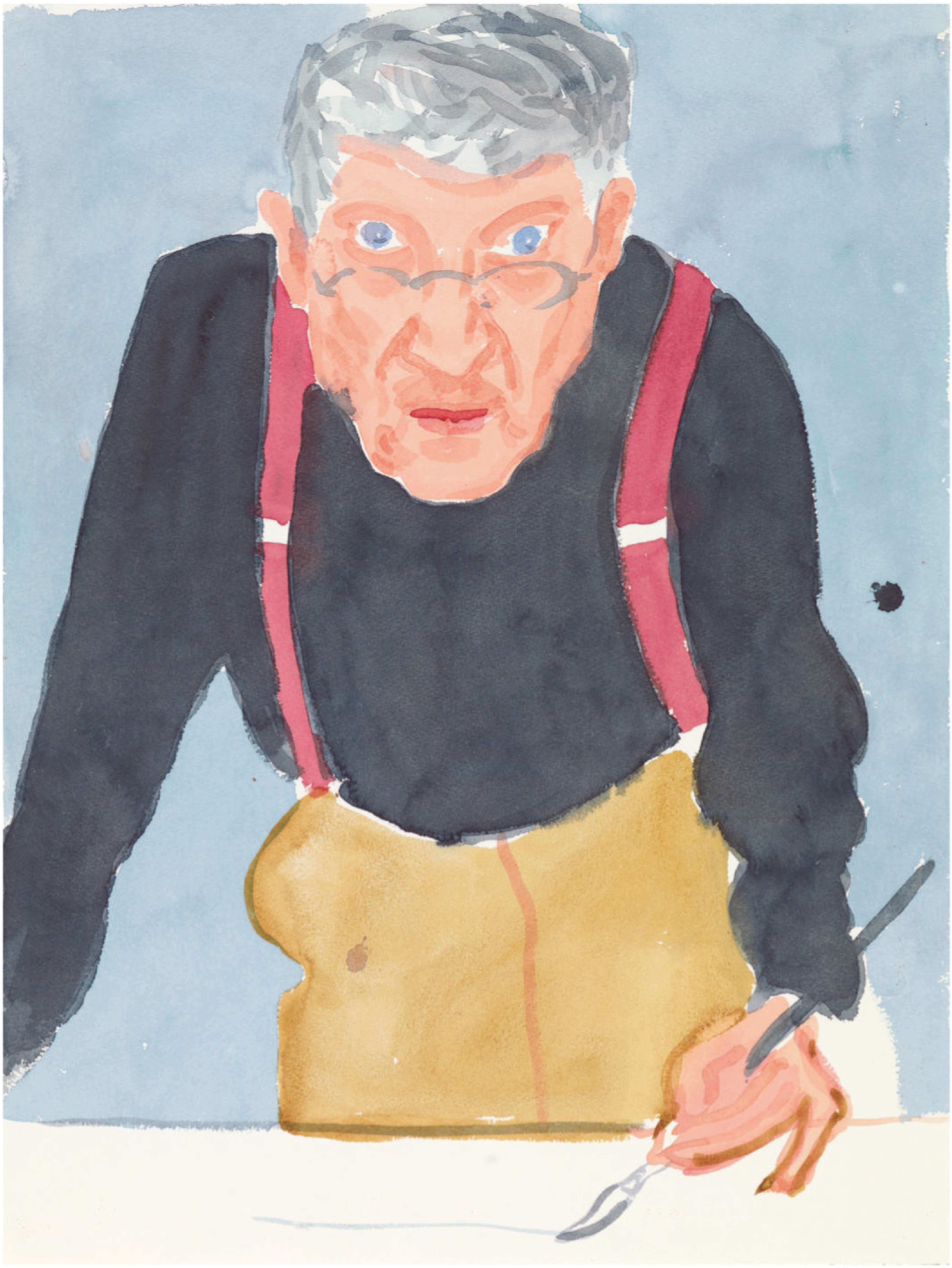
*See Walter M. Shaub Jr.’s “Ransacking the Republic” in these pages, July 2, 2020.



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seat left vacant when Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned in disgrace, and Rockefeller to replace Ford when Ford became president after Richard Nixon resigned facing impeachment).

But if no candidate receives a majority of the Electoral College votes, then the election for president is thrown into the newly elected Congress—which under the Constitution takes office on January 3 and, under the Electoral Count Act, convenes to count the electoral votes on January 6. The House of Representatives selects the president from among the top three vote-getters for president in the Electoral College. Each of the fifty states, whatever its population, gets one vote, and, under the Twelfth Amendment, "a majority of all the states shall be necessary to a choice." The Senate selects between the two candidates for vice-president who received the most electoral votes.

If *those* processes fail and we get neither a president nor a vice-president (who then serves as president), we turn to the Presidential Succession Act of 1947, passed pursuant to Congress's authority under section 2 of the Twentieth Amendment. The Speaker of the House of Representatives, if he or she is eligible to be president (which requires being at least thirty-five years old and a "natural-born Citizen" who has lived in the United States for fourteen years), can resign from Congress and "act as President." If the speaker is ineligible or unwilling, the act then turns to the president *pro tem* of the Senate, and one after another to the members of the cabinet, in order of the seniority of their departments.

With me still? Now come the problems. They start, as Douglas points out, with a challenge to democratic legitimacy that inheres in the very structure of the Constitution: the possibility that a candidate will lose the popular vote but nevertheless obtain a majority in the Electoral College. Social scientists have estimated that under current conditions, there is a one-in-three chance that a popular-vote loser will nonetheless win the electoral vote. And for demographic reasons, that chance skews more heavily in favor of Republicans than Democrats. So far in the 2000s, this mismatch has happened in two of the five elections: in 2000, Al Gore got roughly 500,000 more votes than George W. Bush, but Bush garnered 271 electoral votes to Gore's 266 (with one D.C. elector abstaining in protest); in 2016, Hillary Clinton received 2.87 million more votes than Trump but lost in the Electoral College 304–227 (seven electors—two pledged to Trump and five to Clinton—voted for other candidates). Particularly in a nation as politically polarized as contemporary America, it is a real question how many such elections the people will accept before they demand fundamental change to the way a president is selected.

But of course there can be disputes over which candidate is entitled to a state's electoral votes in the first place. In essence, we have fifty-one different Electoral College elections occurring simultaneously across the country, each of them with its own set of rules about who can vote (for example, what sorts of identity documents are required) and how (in person, by mail, on a single election day or over a weeks-long period). Many of those elections are not likely to be close: it would take a landslide on the order of Johnson-Goldwater in 1964 to give Biden a shot at winning Kansas or one like Reagan-Mondale in 1984 for Trump to win Connecticut. But there are a bunch of swing states in which statewide margins can be infinitesimal. Trump won in 2016 because he got 0.23 percent more votes than Clinton in Michigan, 0.72 percent more in Pennsylvania, and 0.77 percent more in Wisconsin. George W. Bush won in 2000 because he got 537 more votes than Gore in Florida (and one more, from the Supreme Court, in Washington, D.C.).

Will He Go? is focused "less [on] the possibility that Trump will steal victory than that he will reject defeat," perhaps because Douglas is particularly interested in describing the design defects in the architecture of the Twelfth Amendment and the Electoral Count Act. So the second half of Douglas's book offers three scenarios designed to show the kinds of electoral meltdowns that may occur this fall. Each of his scenarios begins on or after election day and involves electoral uncertainty. But we should not ignore the possibility that Douglas skips past: that Trump will create a crisis of democratic legitimacy by manipulating the election system to prevent his defeat.

Here are three possibilities Douglas does not discuss, each of which strikes me as at least as plausible as the ones he does. Nor should we be focused only on whether *Donald Trump* will go. None of my scenarios—or, indeed, Douglas's—depends entirely on the "psychopathology" of Donald Trump. Each of them could occur in any future election, given the stark levels of political polarization in the contemporary United States. By pursuing only the question "Will he go?," Douglas may have downplayed defects in the American election system that will persist even after Trump is gone.

First, Trump could produce an "October surprise" that dispirits Democratic voters or swings undecided voters away from Biden. Douglas recognizes that "in William Barr, Trump has found an attorney general willing to act as the president's private advocate," but he is reassured that Trump's ability to use the Department of Justice for political ends is limited because career DOJ lawyers would resist helping him. I'm not as sanguine. The career lawyers cannot prevent Barr from announcing, on the eve of the election, some version of the results of the inquiry he commissioned into the US government's investigation of the Trump campaign's connections with Russia. Given the disingenuous spin Barr put on the Mueller Report, what will stop him from insinuating that Joe Biden was somehow "involved" in "spying" on Trump's 2016 campaign?

And what will stop Barr and his allies from indulging Trump's desire (expressed in the notorious "perfect" phone call with Ukraine leader Volodymyr Zelensky) and indicting Hunter Biden for some alleged impropriety? Consider the effects on the last election of James Comey's October 28, 2016, letter to Congress seemingly reviving the investigation into Hillary Clinton's e-mails; it dominated several news cycles and halved her lead in the polls.

Second, Trump and his allies in the Republican Party can challenge every effort to ease restrictions on voting by mail or other alternatives to voting in person on election day. In states where both poll workers and prospective voters fear the effects of Covid-19—effects that are disproportionately serious for Black and Latino individuals, who are often crucial Democratic voters—this could drive down turnout. Consider Texas, where Republican state officials and a Republican-dominated state supreme court narrowly construed the state-law provision allowing a citizen to vote by mail if he has a "physical condition" that creates a "likelihood" of "injuring the voter's health" from voting in person. A lack of immunity to the coronavirus, they decided, was not such a condition, even though the voter might be sheltering in place and trying to maintain social distance in order to avoid infecting himself or others. (I represent Texas voters in a federal constitutional challenge to Texas's decision to give only voters over the age of sixty-five an automatic right to vote by mail; we claim this violates the Twenty-Sixth Amendment's command that the right of adult citizens to vote shall not be "abridged" on account of a citizen's "age.")

Third, as in 1876 and 2000, there's always the possibility of controversy in Florida. In 2018 Florida voters (including a significant share of Republican voters) approved an initiative—Amendment 4—that would automatically restore criminal offenders' right to vote (unless they had been convicted of murder or a felony sexual offense) "upon completion of all terms of sentence including parole or probation." Roughly 1.4 million individuals could potentially benefit from the amendment. And in a state that's evenly divided in statewide races, if even a fraction of those former offenders voted, they could determine the outcome.

But the Republican-dominated state legislature and the Republican-dominated state supreme court have defined "completion" of the terms of a sentence to include payment of all financial obligations ordered by the sentencing document. Often these obligations include court costs and fees of hundreds of dollars. Although the Twenty-Fourth Amendment prohibits denying citizens the right to vote for failure to pay "any tax"—and court costs that fund government operations are a form of taxation—the inability to pay these fees will prevent many returning citizens from registering and casting a ballot.

What's worse, many former offenders have no way to find out how much they owe (and face criminal prosecution if they register and vote without paying the full amount). A federal district judge found, after a lengthy trial, that Florida's system for determining the amounts owed was so plagued by intractable administrative problems that it violated the US Constitution. The judge pointed to testimony regarding the efforts of "a professor specializing in this field with a team of doctoral candidates from a major research university" who unsuccessfully spent weeks trying to obtain this information for "153 randomly selected felons." And staff members with "combined experience of over 100 years" in one county clerk's office spent some fifteen hours "bulldog[ing]" the circumstances of a *single* aspiring voter to figure out the amount owed.

The court emphasized that, based on the state's own estimates, the projected completion date for reviewing the obligations of only the 85,000 former offenders who had currently pending registration applications would be "early in 2026. With a flood of additional registrations expected in this presidential election year, the anticipated completion date might well be pushed into the 2030s." But a federal court of appeals—on which five of the ten judges hearing the case are Trump appointees—issued a one-sentence order staying the district court's injunction that left the pay-before-you-can-vote provision in place while the case works its way through the system. And the US Supreme Court left that stay in place, again in a one-sentence order, with Justices Ginsburg, Sotomayor, and Kagan dissenting. So if Trump wins Florida's electoral votes and those votes are essential to his winning the election, his victory will be tainted.

Now consider the three "catastrophe" scenarios Douglas presents. The first is that a pivotal number of electors try to cast their votes for a candidate who outright failed to carry their state's popular vote. Thirty-two states and the District of Columbia have laws insisting that a party-picked slate of electors cast their electoral votes for their party's candidate. But only fifteen states have a system for backing up that pledge requirement with an enforceable sanction (either removing or punishing a so-called faithless elector). Earlier this year, the Supreme Court unanimously upheld the constitutionality of those enforcement devices. But among the jurisdictions without one is the swing state of Pennsylvania. So what happens, Douglas asks, if Trump once again wins a plurality of the vote there, but this time two of the Republican electors decide they cannot support him and instead vote for Mitt Romney, leaving Trump with only 269 electoral votes nationwide, one short of the Twelfth Amendment's required majority?

Douglas posits that the Republican-controlled state legislature would then pass a law canceling the ballots of the two defecting electors and replacing those electors with Trump supporters. The legislature would then send a certificate of election to Congress announcing that Trump has received twenty electoral votes. But the Democratic governor of Pennsylvania might *also* send an election certificate, this one certifying eighteen votes for Trump and two for Romney. What is Congress to do?

The section of the Electoral Count Act that governs counting the votes is, as Douglas puts it, a "semantic salad." It directs Congress to count the votes that are "regularly given." And it provides that if at least one senator and one representative file a written objection to accepting a state's certificate, the two houses are to return to their own chambers and deliberate before continuing the overall count. But the phrase "regularly given" is nowhere defined. Is a vote regularly given if it is the product of a law enacted after election day to change the outcome? And if the House and Senate disagree about whether a vote was regularly given, *and*

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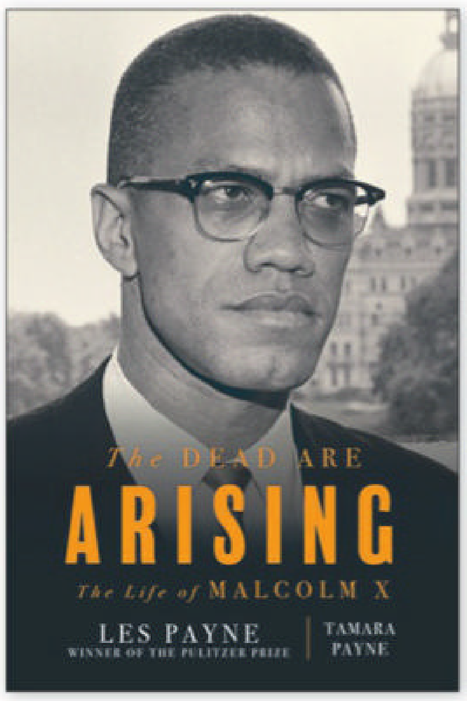
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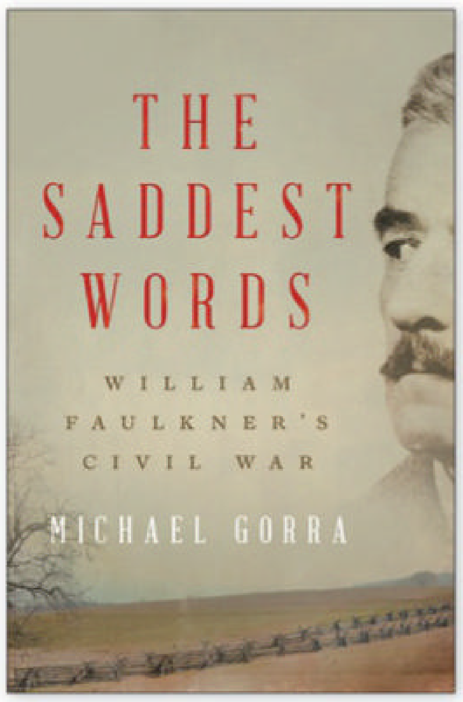
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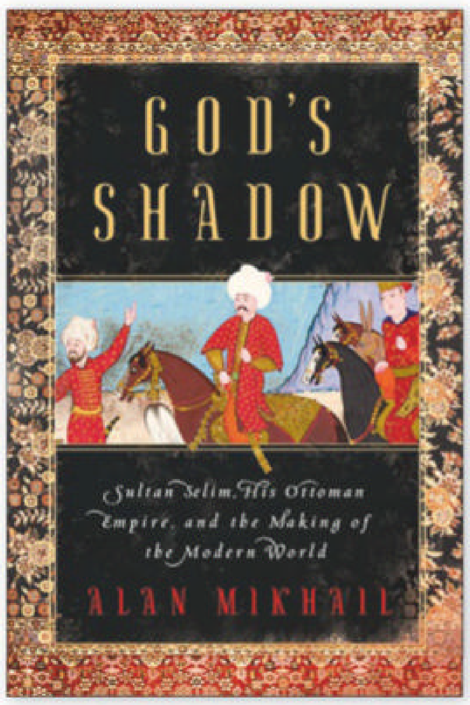
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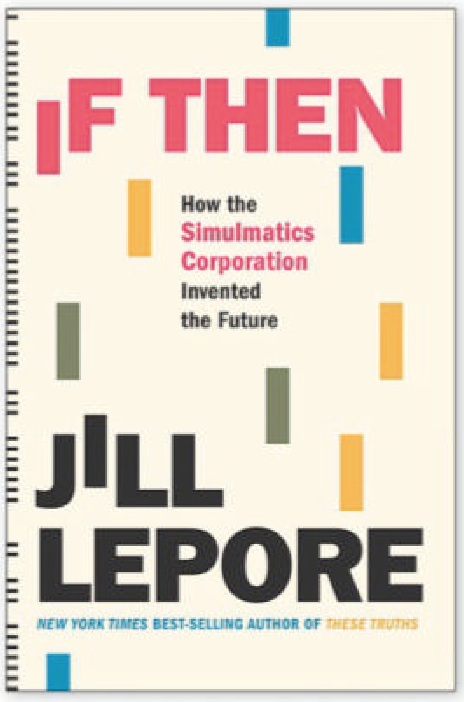
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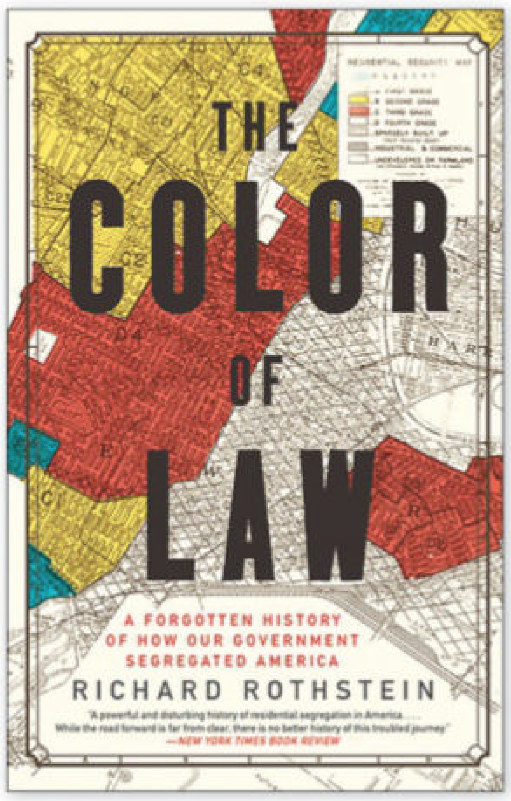
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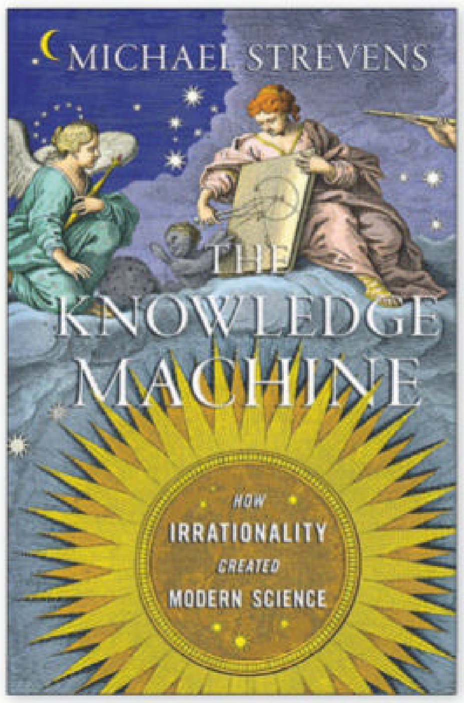
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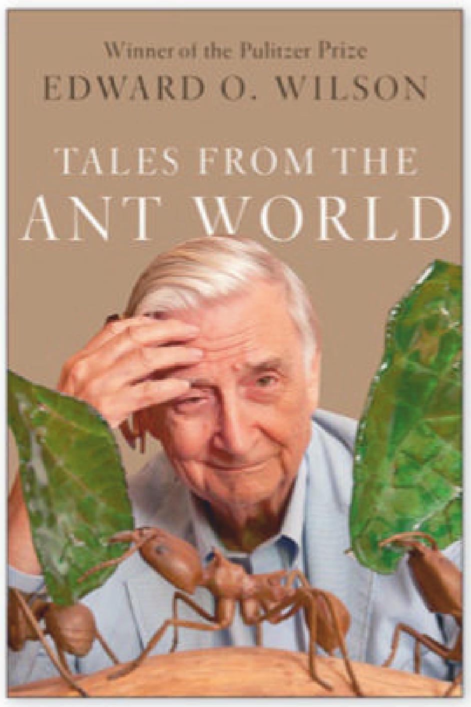
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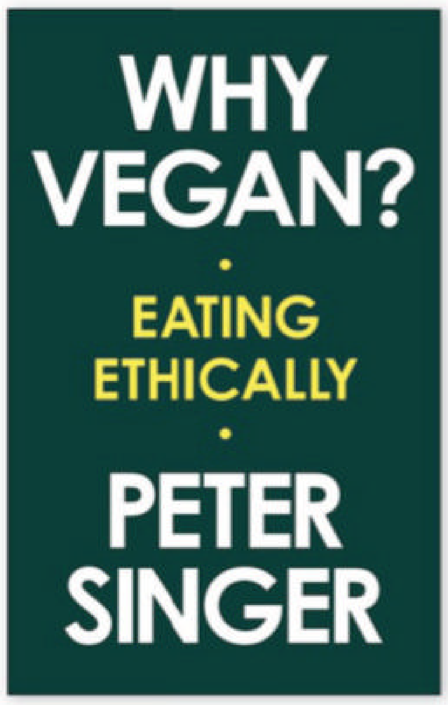
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there are two slates of electors, the act declares “then, and in that case, the votes of the electors whose appointment shall have been certified by the executive of the State, under the seal thereof, shall be counted.” So does that mean the governor-certified slate is the one that should count?

In a close election, the upshot of counting the gubernatorial slate (with its eighteen votes for Trump and two for Romney) may be that no candidate receives a national majority of the electoral votes. This will throw the issue into the Twelfth Amendment's backup mechanism. But that mechanism also fails to account for contingency. What happens if twenty-five of the House delegations are controlled by Democrats and twenty-five by Republicans? If twenty-five delegations cast their vote for Biden and twenty-five cast their vote for Trump, the House will be deadlocked, and unable to pick a president. And what happens if the new Senate in 2021 consists of fifty Democrats and fifty Republicans? It too will deadlock and be unable to pick a vice-president. Assuming that the Democrats hold the House, the Presidential Succession Act authorizes the Speaker of the House (today, Nancy Pelosi, but the new House will select the speaker who will be in office on January 6) to act as president.

Will Trump go under those circumstances? Douglas fears not. Instead, Douglas suggests he may stage his own, competing inauguration and rely on William Barr to deliver a legal opinion stating that he remains the commander-in-chief. After *Will He Go?* was published, Barr was asked at a House Judiciary Committee hearing, “What will you do if Donald Trump loses the election on November 3 but refuses to leave office on January 20?” Barr responded, “Well, if the results are clear, I would leave office.” That, as Douglas anticipates, is a mighty big *if.* What would Barr do if the results are *not* clear? In a 2019 speech at Notre Dame, Barr described a world where he is fighting for America's survival against the evil forces of “secularists, and their allies among the ‘progressives.’” Such views may well color his opinion of the clarity of election results in which those forces claim victory.

Douglas's second “catastrophe” scenario—the “hack attack”—raises the question of clarity in a different way. Suppose that on election day the electric power grid in Detroit suddenly crashes and, as a result, 350,000 fewer votes are cast in Detroit than were cast in 2016. Suppose that in Michigan overall Trump again receives around 10,000 more votes than his Democratic opponent. Isn't it clear, given that Detroit is an overwhelmingly Democratic city that broke two to one for the Democrats the last time around, that Biden would have won Michigan without the shutdown of Detroit's polling places? Although Douglas's scenario involves a deliberate attack on the electoral infrastructure, a natural disaster or human error could have the same effect.

But as Douglas points out, however clear that reality may be, it is quite unclear that there is anything to be done about it: “No revote has ever been staged in a presidential contest.” Suppose a federal court were to order one and, despite the current Supreme Court's fairly consistent rejection of judicial attempts to adapt election laws to the Covid-19 crisis, the justices were to allow the revote to proceed. Trump surely would not accept the results of a revote in which he gets fewer votes than Biden. And if the Supreme Court were to hold that, under the Electoral Count Act, Congress must accept an electoral certificate sent by Democratic governor Gretchen Whitmer reflecting the results of that revote, rather than a competing certificate in Trump's favor submitted by the Republican-controlled Michigan legislature, Trump is unlikely to accept that result either.

Douglas's third “catastrophe” is the “Big Blue Shift.” Unlike the other two scenarios, which are possible but unlikely, this one is almost certain to happen. But unlike the other two, the blue shift is not a catastrophe (except, perhaps, from Trump's point of view). Instead, it's just a reflection of contemporary voting patterns.

EMPTY ENVELOPES 70TH AD
71 VALID
VOTE NYC
EMPTY ENVELOPES 72ND AD
Table 6
UNITED STATES

Victor J. Blue/The New York Times/Redux

Board of Elections workers counting absentee ballots, Brooklyn, July 2020

In recent years, a greater and greater percentage of Americans have cast their ballots without going to the polls on election day. In some places, they cast their ballots early, usually at the registrar's office or at a voting supercenter. But the largest change has been the explosion in voting by mail. Originally called “absentee voting” because it was designed to enable voters who would be away from the jurisdiction on election day—its origins go back to the Civil War, when Republican states in the North used it to keep Union troops in the field without sacrificing their electoral support—it has now been extended to a much larger cohort of individuals. In a half-dozen states, virtually all voting is conducted at least partially by mail: the state sends ballots to all registered voters, who can return those ballots either by mail or by dropping them off in designated locations. In most other states, no-excuse vote by mail is available to any voter who applies to vote that way. In a handful of states, voters are permitted to vote by mail only if they qualify under a specified excuse.

Covid-19 has accelerated the trend toward voting by mail. In the April 2020 primary in Wisconsin, absentee voting was up by more than 650 percent compared to ordinary elections. In Pennsylvania's June primary, about 50 percent of voters voted absentee, compared to 5 to 7 percent normally.

On top of the trend toward voting by mail, the federal Help America Vote Act, passed after the 2000 election debacle, requires states to provide a “provisional” ballot to any individual who shows up at the polls on election day but who appears not to be registered—or to whom election officials are otherwise unwilling to provide a ballot (perhaps for failure to satisfy a voter ID requirement). Strikingly, federal law provides no rule for whether or when a state must *count* provisional ballots. Each state has its own rules. Some states make efforts to determine whether ballots are valid, including notifying voters of defects and providing them with an opportunity to rectify any problems. Other states are far more restrictive.

But the upshot of this increase of early voting, mail-in voting, and provisional ballots is that there are a large number of ballots that require some form of processing before they can be counted. And for at least some of these ballots, that processing cannot be completed or perhaps even started before election day itself, either because the ballot has not yet arrived or been cast or because state law forbids beginning to tabulate before the polls close.

In many, but by no means all, jurisdictions, mail-in ballots and provisional ballots skew Democratic. For example, in Pennsylvania in 2016, when mail-in voting was only a fraction of what it was in the 2020 primary, Trump's margin shrank by 24,000 votes between election night and the final tally.

Trump believes, perhaps with good reason, that the vote-by-mail electorate in crucial states will be less supportive of him than the in-person electorate. So without pointing to any reliable evidence, he has tried to cast doubt on the integrity of states that send ballots to all voters, and perhaps of states that even send all voters vote-by-mail applications. (He seems to be fine with some forms of absentee voting, at least in jurisdictions run by Republicans.)

On top of that, over the summer, Trump made a series of remarks suggesting that he was opposed to providing sufficient funding to the United States Postal Service to handle the upsurge in voting by mail. At roughly the same time, the recently appointed postmaster general and Republican mega-donor Louis DeJoy announced an “organizational realignment” of the Postal Service that reduced employee overtime hours (resulting in delays to some mail delivery) and eliminated certain postal-sorting machines. In letters sent to all states and the District of Columbia in July, the Postal Service's general counsel warned election officials that state laws permitting voters to request ballots less than fifteen days before the election “are incongruous with the Postal Service's delivery standards.” While public and congressional outrage forced DeJoy to back down on some of the changes, the question remains whether the move to a mostly vote-by-mail election will run smoothly.

But even with all these difficulties, millions and millions of mail-in ballots will be returned in time to be counted—and in California, for example, a ballot is timely as long as it is postmarked on or before election day and arrives no later than seventeen days after the election. So in tight races, the election-night results may not indicate the ultimate winner. For example, in 2018 Arizona Republican senatorial candidate Martha McSally was up by 15,000 votes over her rival Kyrsten Sinema on election night but lost by 56,000 votes after the mail-in ballots were counted.

What will happen, Douglas asks, if Trump is ahead on election night in critical states but starts to fall behind as the mail-in or provisional ballots get tallied? Douglas anticipates that Trump, perhaps aided by a politicized Department of Justice (which lacks independent litigating authority but can file statements of interest in the district court and amicus briefs supporting a party in the courts of appeals or Supreme Court), would surely litigate to stop the count while he is still ahead or to challenge those ballots. What happens if the counts are not completed by December 14, the date electors are required to cast their votes, let alone if the counts are not completed by January 6, when Congress meets to count the electoral votes? Will Trump accept the results if election officials conclude that Biden has received more votes? Douglas cites Robert Reich's view that Trump will prove “pathologically incapable of admitting defeat,” and we would find ourselves in a constitutional crisis.

But a huge danger lies ahead even if the upcoming election goes smoothly, or smoothly enough to satisfy the Election Official's Prayer—“Dear Lord, let this election not be close.” I am less optimistic than Douglas that a “decisive defeat” for Trump would avoid a crisis. If Trump leaves the White House on January 20, 2020, he will not go gentle into that good night. Addicted as he is to Twitter and the limelight, he is likely to continue attacking his successor, stirring up his base, and suggesting that the election was stolen, thereby continuing to undermine the legitimacy of the democratic system. Douglas imagines the former president setting up with Sean Hannity at the Trump International Hotel just a half-mile from the White House, where he can launch his long-planned cable network, rally his die-hard supporters, and “remain a force of chaos for years to come. Indeed, having lost in 2020, he could run again in 2024.” So whatever happens in November, the answer to the question “Will he go?” may unfortunately be: “Not for a long, long time.”

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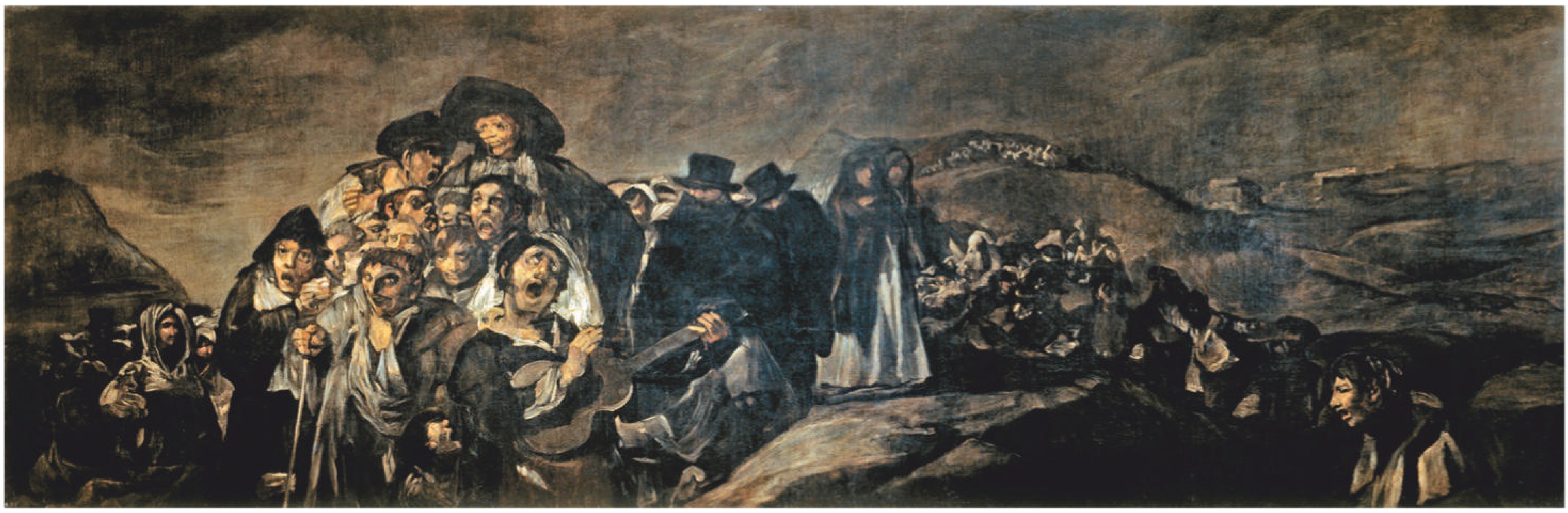
Claude Monet. *Houses of Parliament, London* (detail), 1906. The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection.

‘Teeming with Things Unknown’

Julian Bell



Francisco Goya: The Pilgrimage to San Isidro, *1820–1823*

Museo del Prado, Madrid

Goya: A Portrait of the Artist
by Janis A. Tomlinson.
Princeton University Press,
388 pp., $35.00

The art of Francisco Goya has stood as a beacon over the cultural landscape during the nearly two centuries since his death, at age eighty-two, in 1828. It is a source of light that glares. We think of the terrible dazzle on the shirt of the laborer in Goya’s vast canvas *The Third of May 1808*—the sure target for the squad lined up to shoot him. We think how the bright bodies of Goya’s *Majas*, both naked and clothed, pulse out their summons to lust as if lit from within. Witches, mules, and mutants jump up, abrupt islands of whiteness, from the dusky aquatint textures of the *Caprichos*: and when, in some of the *Desastres de la guerra*, the sheet is almost shadowless, we confront the hardest, harshest sunlight that ever shone. For Goya, to portray is emphatically to illuminate. The courtiers surge into view in pastings of lead-white paint—the glow of cheeks and collars, the shimmer of sashes and muslin, the brilliance of buttons. Figures gleam, figures loom: in Goya’s handling, even their blacks are bright. His first remit is to make bodies come forth. What he delivers is a shocking immediacy.

Goya’s formidable art may have had its imitators—disputes have rumbled since 2008 over who actually painted the Prado’s allegory of a land in crisis, *The Colossus*—but it sets a standard by which to compare all else: in this sense, it feels primal. By the same token, we struggle adequately to describe it, and we may come away not merely dazzled but puzzled. The *Caprichos*, the 1799 album of etchings for which Goya first received international attention, runs human bodies through many an indignity: they lurch, tumble, and slump, they flip from flirting to hurting one another horrifically, they morph into beasts. But the satire’s targets fluctuate in tandem. Is it taking aim at humanity in general? Or more specifically at the Spain of Carlos IV? Is it the psychopathology of the rabble around him that Goya is probing, or that which lurks within the artist himself? Repeatedly, we are left unsure of whom to laugh at. The terse captions (“All will fall,” “A bad night,” “Who’d have thought it!”) compound the unease, as does the self-portrait on the frontispiece—a top-hatted man-about-Madrid regarding us with a disdainful sideways leer.

Where did this soon-to-be-appointed “first painter to the court” place his allegiances? Our hearts go out to the workers struggling to carry donkeys on their backs in the *Capricho* titled “You who can’t,” just as they do to that proletarian facing the firing squad. But their inventor used the common people of Spain as fodder for comedy in the many tapestry cartoons he designed for the palaces of his patrons, of whom—according to Janis Tomlinson, in her new biography *Goya: A Portrait of the Artist*—he painted “ever respectful” portraits “in which naturalism and flattery are held in perfect balance.” With brushes in hand, Goya delivered in 1819 the last and most gravely moving of his altarpieces, showing Saint Joseph of Calasanz about to receive his final communion; at much the same time, with his burin, the septuagenarian scratched another wide-open mouth, that of a corpse in the tomb, his finger bones clutching a book inscribed, “Nothing.” Are the *Black Paintings* of the following years—those unforgettable murals of a deranged Saturn devouring his offspring, of equally crazed drunkards and devotees, and of a dog sunk in quicksand—further pointers to a tragic nihilism? Or do they rather confront us with a devil-may-care survivor flaunting a matchlessly wild sense of humor, in decorations intended for his own private palace?

Writers have typically addressed these ambivalences by hailing Goya—who was in his mid-forties when the ancien régime was swept away beyond the Pyrenees—as the first artist of “modernity.” With him we see a studio practice uniquely well equipped, via his long prior training in the figurative language of European art and by his own fearless temperament, to take on the challenges to collective self-understanding that the revolutionary era initiated and to deliver icons for our subsequent disenchanted predicament. Thus we read Charles Baudelaire championing the “nightmare teeming with things unknown” of the *Caprichos*, and Andrei Voznesensky clutching the *Desastres*: “I am Goya . . . /I am the tongue/of war, the embers of cities/on the snows of the year 1941/I am hunger.” And thus Robert Hughes prefaced his 2003 biography by proclaiming Goya more “urgent” than any artist at work in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

In this way Goya’s imagery has floated free of its original temporal moorings, as is the way with any really strong art. A historian who wishes to steer it back to harbor might start by converting the words “premodern” and “modern” into “located” and “nonlocated.” For Goya started out as a supplier of pictures to specified destinations, obeying formats that would have been familiar to any European painter from the fourteenth century onward. As the second son of a Zaragoza gilder whose brother followed their father’s trade, he trained in a related specialism and turned out devotional paintings starting in his teens. Soon attaching himself to the best-connected artist in the Aragonese capital—Francisco Bayeu, whose younger sister Josefa he married—Goya joined him on fresco projects and at twenty-five landed one for himself in the city cathedral.

Bayeu had a foothold in Madrid as a court painter, and there Goya headed in his late twenties, finding a niche as an inventor of painted scenes (“cartoons”) to be woven as tapestries for the royal family’s various residences. While his fresco painting had leaned initially toward the rowdy clouds-and-lightbursts of the Baroque and then toward a cool incoming neoclassicism, these sunny palace pastorals built on the pictorial comedies of Watteau, enlarging them in scale and expanding the social range of the dramatis personae. Finding that Goya was excellent company in shooting parties and moreover that he had a keen eye for the costumiers’ latest fashions, the grandees of Madrid began to swell his income, starting in his late thirties, with an increasing demand for portraits.

A tale, then, of good integration: the steady rise of an adept purveyor of pictures meant for somewhere and someone. The above précis omits one bid made for future glory: at twenty-three, Goya went off on a tour of Italy, to learn from its historic masterpieces. But then his clientele had few problems with a commoner holding grand ambitions. The reign of Carlos III, which ran from Goya’s fourteenth to his forty-third year, saw Enlightenment sympathies such as respect for the practical artisan gaining a small but articulate bridgehead in the polite society of the Spanish capital, if not in the nation’s hierarchical heartlands. The change in cultural temper spread beyond those who might actually have heard of Adam Smith or Rousseau, the well-educated progressives known as *ilustrados*. This helps explain one facet of the Goya puzzle, namely why clients warmed to a portrait practice that—as Tomlinson concedes, *pace* her claim that it was “respectful”—could be “brutally” forthright.

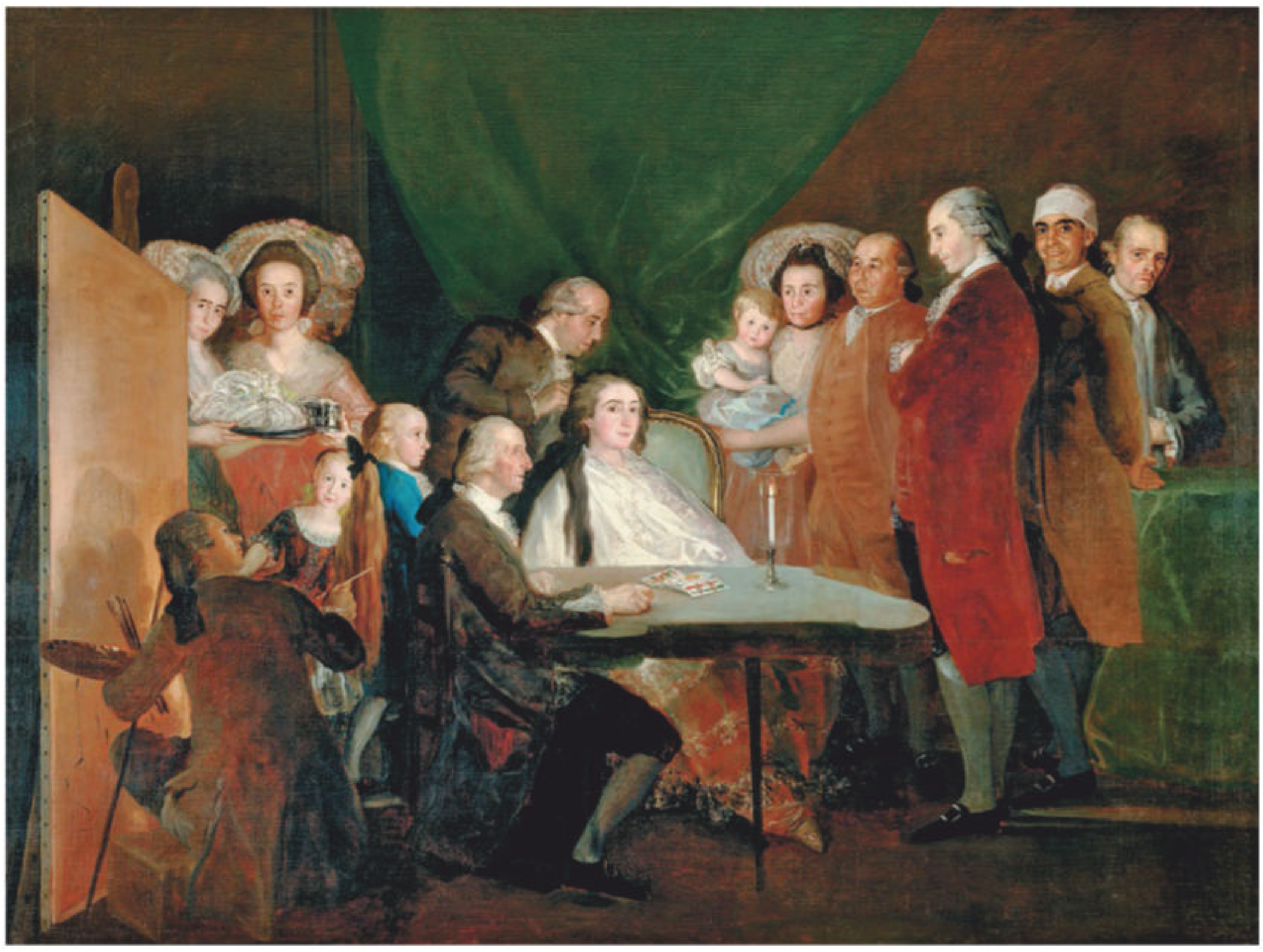
Tomlinson tells how Goya, once admitted to the Bourbon monarchs’ palace, was thrilled to discover its Velázquez canvases painted for the previous dynasty—their images hardly having been circulated before. Here were prototypes for an up-and-comer who talked of basing his art on “nature” rather than on academic rules. And yet the 1650s naturalism of *Las Meninas* feels hardly like the naturalism of Goya’s 1784 recasting, *The Family of the Infante don Luis de Borbón*. Poise and reserve make way for a brash, blasting facture. Goya has his sights on all these types, high and low—the aging playboy “infante,” no sharper-witted than his brother the king; his self-conscious glam young wife; their children; her hairdresser; their mischievous retainers. They fall to his brush as he squats at his easel like the eighteen animals he once boasted of bringing down with nineteen successive shots. His sincerity, his warmth—his gaucheness, even—win the day. The Age of Sentiment has arrived in Spain.

To be followed—in France—by the Age of Revolution, news of which the ministers of the next monarch, Carlos IV, did their best to suppress in their now economically precarious nation. A main challenge for any biographer is to explain how the subsequent convulsions—at length striking Spain directly with the Napoleonic invasion of 1808, followed by six years of the Peninsular War—affected an artist whose profile largely rests on the work of his later years. (Goya turned fifty in 1796.)

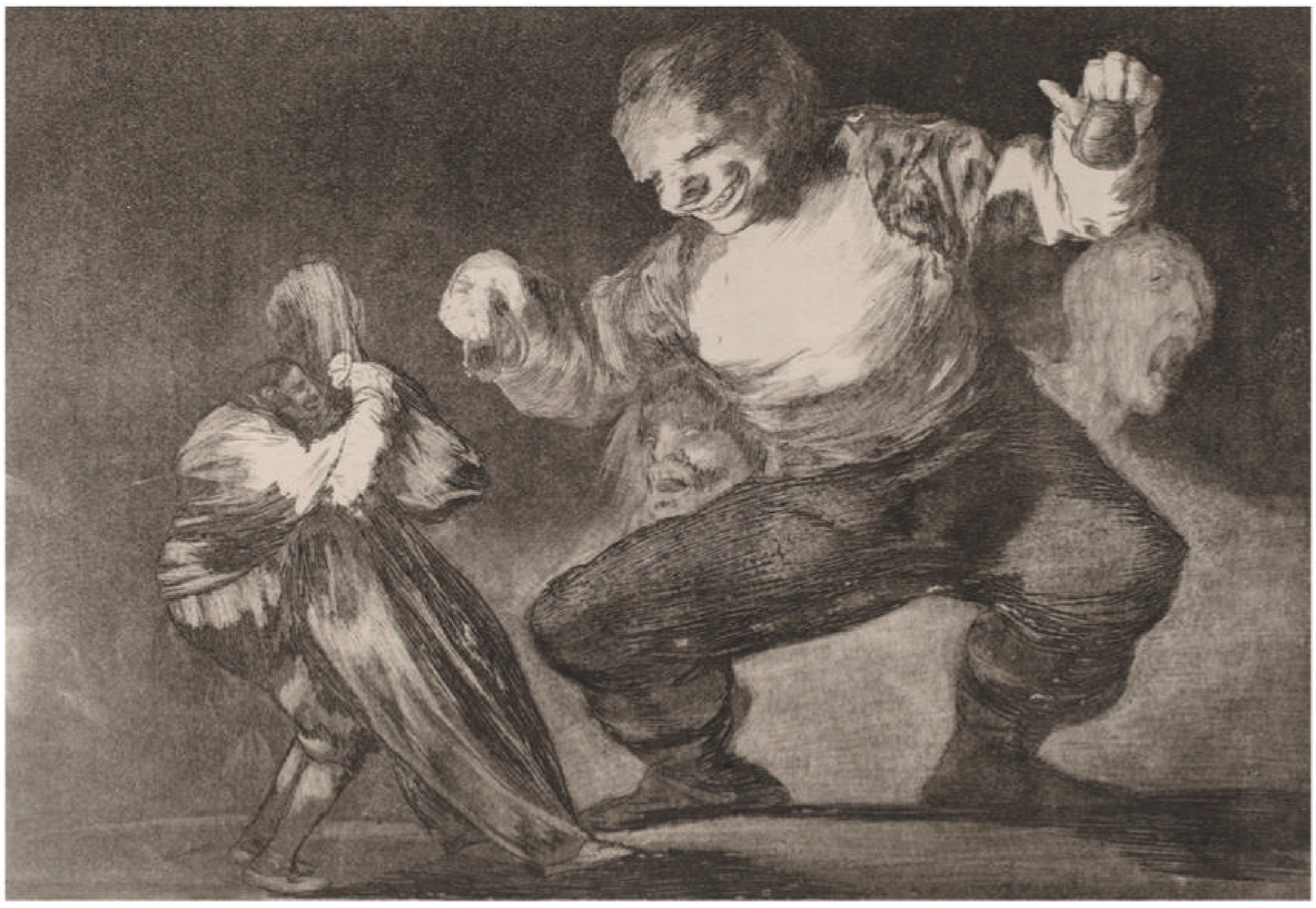
Tomlinson, a scholar who has been publishing on Goya for over three decades, is concerned to disentangle him from the retroactive politicizations of his admirers. Her "portrait of the artist," as the subtitle has it, presents a property owner intent, through successive regime changes, to look out for Number One. After Napoleon's brother Joseph entered Madrid only to be swiftly chased out of it in the summer of 1808, Goya painted an equestrian portrait of his Bourbon rival, Fernando VII, for the Royal Academy: in May the next year, with Joseph back in power, Goya cheekily complained that he hadn't yet been paid; he was still complaining when Fernando finally resumed the throne in 1814. But Goya had also, it seems, painted an equestrian Joseph: the face on that canvas ended up replaced by that of the Duke of Wellington, the Napoleonic army's nemesis. While many in his circle may have been *ilustrados*, favoring a more liberal Spain, Goya, Tomlinson argues, "served kings and their courts rather than ideologies."

In this account, the breakup of that circle in Goya's later fifties, as old friends died or left town, is the chief caesura in a highly paid and acclaimed career that was at its peak around 1800. But this reinterpretation of the story can only go so far. Against it stands the best-known fact about Goya's life: that in 1792–1793, at the age of forty-six, this mainstay of the *tertulia*, whose special requests in hired accommodation included "a wine bag and a small guitar," suffered an illness (possibly caused by the poisonous lead-white pigment on which he relied) that left him completely and permanently deaf. The tough professional in Goya may have bounced back, swiftly mastering sign language, but the power of *invención* on which he prided himself was undeniably redirected.

Watching others jabber soundlessly, Goya "no longer took meaning for granted," Tomlinson notes: a detachment explicitly proclaimed when he published the *Caprichos* six years later. That one-man initiative to bring to Madrid a discursive and critical art culture—rather like that which Hogarth's prints had launched in 1730s London—was surely in sympathy with *ilustrado* sentiments, even if Tomlinson insists that it was never in danger of censorship from the Inquisition. But with that print series, the marksman started firing his shots in the air. Who could tell where and how among the unseen public they might land, these baffling—and indeed also baffled—observations of human behavior? So began Goya's voyage away from a located picture-making.


Magnani-Rocca Foundation, Parma

Francisco Goya: The Family of the Infante don Luis de Borbón, *1784*


National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Francisco Goya: Simpleton, *circa 1816*

It was a journey outward that he would continue, between his more profitable labors, until his dying day. It passed through reimaginings of current atrocity too savage to be circulated (the *Desastres* would not be published till 1863), through the private dark ride of the *Black Paintings* inside the country mansion he occupied in the early 1820s, and on to the aleatory experiments of his final four years, little figural visions suggested by blots that formed when water droplets fell on carbon-coated ivory. By then, Goya was literally dislocated. He had fled across the Pyrenees to seek congenial company among Spanish exiles in Bordeaux, abandoning a Madrid where his efforts for the reactionary Fernando VII—the *Third of May*, for instance—were seemingly thought passé.

All this later work has attracted many explanations, both political and psychological. But in a sense to pin meanings on it is beside the point. For what was "modern"—to fall back to that word—was the move from arithmetic into algebra: into appointing an unknown, an *x*, that was at once the mystery audience and the mystery of the inventive voice within. No imagination was ever more devoted to the figure, but in those old man's fantasias, with their lumps of hurled-about body mass, the devotion is so pure as almost to turn abstract.

Tomlinson's detailed account of this long and productive life is discriminating and trustworthy. Her revisionary examinations of what Goya did and why he did it seem generally plausible to me, and a bonus of the book is her close focus on the changing city life of Madrid. But the doyenne of a field of study may not be its best advocate. Where Goya first went to school; how he paid for his trip to Italy; to what extent he employed assistants; how, once deaf, he picked up signing; what Javier, his one surviving child, did with his life—these common-sense questions have, I expect, been resolved by Tomlinson to her own satisfaction so long ago that it does not occur to her now to discuss them.

She also passes in silence over controversies such as the authorship of *The Colossus*. Firmer editing would have jogged her elbow when she yawned at her duty of chronicling: from "wartime Madrid was a city of contrasts" to *The Third of May* being "an iconic image of good versus evil," her phrasing is frequently lackluster. It might have encouraged her to inject some argumentative excitement into the politics of the era and, still more, to confer some individuality on the story's characters. What manner of man was Gaspar de Jovellanos, Goya's most distinguished *ilustrado* patron? "A good person to know" is all we learn. What manner of woman did Goya live with? Ignoring whatever frustrations Josefa was expressing in her lone reported comment that "the house is the wives' grave," Tomlinson concludes from her husband's single drawing of her that she "fulfilled her duties patiently... enduring with a quiet grace."

What Josefa endured many another household would have known: the deaths in infancy of Javier's six siblings and their father's cocksure machismo. In one of his tumbling, impassioned letters to the businessman Martín Zapater, his old buddy from Zaragoza, Goya went so far as to declare that "I prefer you to all the pleasures and joys of the matrimonial alcove."* That preference was not, Tomlinson reckons, one of sexual taste—and the way that Goya's imagery dotes on curvaceous females supports her judgment. But it aligns with Goya's scorn for academic precepts that would "vilify and effeminate" the "liberal" art of which he was becoming, by his early forties, the unchallengeable master. This was the Madrid arriviste—the would-be Francisco "de" Goya—who had to buy the latest thing, such as a new "birlocho in the English style," but who crashed it on his first drive and then nearly killed a pedestrian before shrugging and trading it in.

"I spend a lot, because I decided to and because I like it," he told Zapater. In the final Bordeaux years, with his hearing, his late wife, and his nation's frontiers all behind him, Goya defiantly insisted that "only my will abounds," while a fellow exile remarked that this restless old grouch was working "with a new vehemence, never wanting to correct anything that he paints." In sum, the tale is of push, push, push: take a knock, dust yourself off; charge on, exultantly unself-critical. Its hero was exultantly willing, therefore, not only to pour his heart into the figures he portrayed, but to let his *invención* take him wherever it would, even into the eeriest nowheres.

It is a tale of indomitable energy, and seventeen years ago it was told by an author whose vivacity echoed that of the art itself. The late Robert Hughes's *Goya* is a shamelessly cantankerous and sometimes sentimental performance, but one that grippingly communicates the historical tensions of Goya's era and the thrills of engaging with his oeuvre. It seems ungenerous that this earlier publication should go wholly unacknowledged in what Princeton University Press tendentiously claims to be Goya's "first major English-language biography." Tomlinson has supplied a cool and corrective scholarly chronicle. But for the general reader's purposes, Hughes still serves Goya better. ☐

**Francisco Goya (1746–1828): Letters of Love and Friendship*, translated by Jacqueline Hara (Edwin Mellen, 1997), p. 127. This striking avowal is not actually quoted by Tomlinson.

The Desk and the Daring

Dayna Tortorici

Unfinished Business:
Notes of a Chronic Re-Reader
by Vivian Gornick.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
161 pp., $25.00; $16.00 (paper)

The Romance of
American Communism
by Vivian Gornick.
Verso, 265 pp., $19.95 (paper)

Approaching Eye Level
by Vivian Gornick.
Picador, 164 pp., $15.99 (paper)

The End of the Novel of Love
by Vivian Gornick.
Picador, 165 pp., $16.00 (paper)

"From birth to death," writes Vivian Gornick, in her memoir *The Odd Woman and the City*,

> we are, every last one of us, divided against ourselves. We both want to grow up and don't want to grow up; we hunger for sexual pleasure, we dread sexual pleasure; we hate our own aggressions—anger, cruelty, the need to humiliate—yet they derive from the grievances we are least willing to part with.

From there the divisions multiply. We long for experience, we shrink from experience; we want to understand, we don't want to understand. We confuse our neuroses for our innermost truths and in the end it all boils down to: nothing. Pointless disharmony. "Friendships are random, conflicts prevail, work is the sum of its disabilities," she writes in another memoir, *Fierce Attachments*.

But then there are times when we feel ourselves whole. We stand at the center of our experience and something inside us "flares into bright life." Under the influence of "a conviction of inner clarity," we become eloquent, prolific—what Gornick calls our "expressive selves." *This*, we feel, is the meaning of life. *This* is what it means to be alive.

Gornick has published thirteen books in fifty years, fourteen if you count *Woman in Sexist Society*, the anthology of feminist writing she coedited with Barbara K. Moran in 1971. Most concern someone whose quest for the "expressive self" rises to the level of an addiction. In a new introduction to *The Romance of American Communism*, her 1977 book reissued earlier this year, Gornick observes that "there is a certain kind of cultural hero—the artist, the scientist, the thinker—who is often characterized as one who lives for 'the work.'" This hero is her subject. Why do people devote their lives to causes that deprive them of love and comfort and ordinary happiness, Gornick asks? As a lifelong writer, a woman of blunt manner and deep feeling for whom the effort is agony, she has a personal investment in the answer.

Gornick has long enjoyed an audience of literary depressives and feminists. Now, a late-career revival is expanding her readership. In 2015 *The Odd Woman and the City* introduced her to a new generation. In 2020 four more Gornick titles have given occasion for a backward glance: *Unfinished Business*, a new bibliomemoir about rereading, and reissues of *Approaching Eye Level* (1996), *The End of the Novel of Love* (1997), and *The Romance of American Communism*. The timing of their publication could be chalked up to the return of American socialism, or to the tendency to rediscover women artists in old age. But the lasting value of her work lies in her commitment to the question of what it means to feel "expressive": to experience the feeling that tells a person "not approximately, but precisely" who they are.

Mitch Bach

Vivian Gornick, Greenwich Village, September 2020

Because Gornick is foremost a memoirist, any tour of her work must contend with her autobiography as she tells it, in fragments. There is no single book in which she narrates her life story straight through; "truth in memoir," she writes in *The Situation and the Story* (2001), "is achieved not through a recital of actual events." Instead, each of her books marshals different pieces of her life in service of a central insight, whether she's writing memoir, criticism, reportage, or a biography of someone else. She is dedicated to nonfiction as a genre, but has a novelist's instinct for selection. To recount her biography chronologically thus requires some reconstruction.

Gornick was born in 1935 in the Bronx, the second child of working-class immigrant Jews. Her father, she recalls in *The Romance of American Communism*, was a kind man who "stood upright on the floor of a dress factory on West 35th Street...with a steam iron in his hand for thirty years." Her mother, a passionate woman with a rougher style of affection, kept house. Both were fellow travelers of the American Communist Party and impressed the political nature of life on their children. Before she knew that she was "Jewish or a girl," Gornick wrote in the late 1970s, "I knew I was a member of the working class." Neighbors and comrades gathered at their kitchen table to "talk issues." Young Vivian "listened, wild-eyed, to the talk":

> I understood nothing of what they were saying, but I was excited beyond words by the richness of their rhetoric, the intensity of their arguments.... Something important was happening here, I always felt, something that had to do with understanding things. And "to understand things," I already knew, was the most exciting, the most important thing in life.

Although the more political of Gornick's parents, her mother, Bess, "stopped everything" when the children were born. ("It was, in fact, part of her deprivation litany that if it hadn't been for the children she would have developed into a talented public speaker," Gornick writes.) Bess was in her element at home—lively, sarcastic, the doyenne of the building—but she railed against what she called "the emptiness of a woman's life." The transformative ideal that elevated her condition was not working-class struggle, but love. Love, she told her daughter, "in hundreds of ways, over thousands of days," was the most important thing in a woman's life. It gave her "a place in the universe," lifted "a cloud of obscurity" from her soul. ("That's how she put it: a cloud of obscurity.") Even the unhappily married women of the Bronx kept the faith, Gornick wrote in *The End of the Novel of Love*. "*Our* lives might be small and frightened," they seemed to say, but

> in the ideal life...the educated life, the brave life, the life out in the world, love would not only be pursued, it would be achieved; and once achieved transform existence.... The promise of love alone would one day give us the courage to leave these caution-ridden precincts and turn our faces toward: experience.

When Gornick was thirteen, her father died of a heart seizure. This, too, was experience, from which Bess never recovered. At the age of forty-six, she went back to work clerking in an office, passing nights and weekends on the living room couch in an exquisite mourning that became her passion. Her depression "leak[ed] into the air like the steady escape of gas when the pilot light is extinguished." Gornick breathed it in daily. Her refuge was the fire escape facing the street, where she sat on summer nights and dreamed up tragic stories.

Gornick was always a reader. When she was "quite small," Bess introduced her to the local branch of the New York Public Library, and by the time she graduated high school she had "read [her] way around the room." At seventeen, she started City College, where she met a new world of ideas. Gornick's sentences grew longer, with words her mother didn't understand. Bess had hotly defended her daughter's right to "an education" to her family ("Where is it written that a working-class widow's daughter should go to college?" one of Gornick's uncles asked), but this referendum on her own intelligence was not what she'd had in mind. One afternoon, she lay on the couch and asked Gornick what she was reading. "A comparative history of the idea of love over the last three hundred years," she said. "That's ridiculous," Bess replied. "Love is love." When Gornick shot back, "That's absolutely not true.... It's only an idea, Ma. That's all love is. Just an idea," Bess was off the couch so fast her daughter didn't see her feet hit the ground. She chased Gornick through the apartment, crying, "I'll kill you. How dare you talk to me that way?" Gornick reached the bathroom—the only room with a lock—but her mother couldn't stop in time. Her arm collided with the door. "Blood, screams, shattered glass on both sides of the door," Gornick writes. "I thought that afternoon, One of us is going to die of this attachment."

Gornick went on to NYU for a master's in literature, then to Berkeley for a Ph.D. She wanted to write seriously, but all that talk of love had wormed its way into her brain. She felt she could not work—*really* work—until she'd found the man to support the dream. She settled on a painter, an art student living in North Beach, whose "missionary zeal for painting appealed strongly" to her own moralism about the seriousness of literature. They married in the Bronx and returned to California, whereupon they realized their mistake. Vivian didn't want to merge libraries; her husband didn't want to walk on Sundays. ("'Only a *bourgeois* must go walking on Sunday,' he said, 'not an artist.'") Gornick stared down a future of baking casserole recipes clipped from women's magazines and balked. Worse, she couldn't write. Her one moment of breakthrough occurred in the second year of her marriage, and her account of it, in *Fierce Attachments*, is sublime:

> I was writing an essay, a piece of graduate-student criticism that had flowered without warning into thought.... The sentences began pushing up in me, struggling to get out, each one moving swiftly to add itself to the one that preceded it. I realized suddenly that an image had taken control of me: I saw its shape and its outline clearly.... My insides cleared out into a rectangle, all clean air and uncluttered space.... In the middle of the rectangle only my image, waiting patiently to clarify itself. I experienced a joy then I knew nothing else in the world would ever equal.... I understood everything I needed to understand in order that I might act, live, be.

The feeling didn't last, and the husband didn't help. The transformative power of love fell short of its promise: there would be no diving "down into feeling" and coming up "magically changed," no escaping the painful effort of learning how to write and how to be. The couple fought, agonized, split. At thirty, Gornick dropped out of graduate school and moved back to New York, where she began to write in earnest. The effort was still torture to her: "Though I could talk a blue streak that often made a listener say 'You should write that up,'" she writes in *Unfinished Business*, "when it came to it, I'd almost invariably suffer a paralyzing case of self-doubt." Only occasionally did a "burning sense of necessity" allow her to finish a piece of writing.

Gornick's first article for the *Village Voice*, the amazingly titled "An Ofay's Indirect Address to LeRoi Jones," was one such instance. In March 1965 Gornick had attended a talk called "Art vs. Politics" with the writer LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), the artist Larry Rivers, the musician Archie Shepp, and the filmmaker Jonas Mekas. Jones and Shepp laid into the white, middle-class bohemians in attendance for their complicity in racism in the arts, and the room exploded in indignation. "I've paid my dues," one writer shouted, "and you know it, LeRoi." When others asked what more they could do—like the bespectacled man, "shaken with emotion," who said, "As a Jew and a white man, I hear you"—Jones and Shepp said, "Die baby. The only thing you can do for me is die." Gornick absorbed it all, went home "burning with a sense of urgency [she] couldn't really account for," and "sat up half the night" writing. In the morning she mailed her report to the *Voice*. From that point she had the editor's attention. What would she write next?

Here was her "open invitation to face down this painful disability and begin to realize the lifelong ambition of writing professionally." Instead, more self-evasion: she got married again. Within two years she was divorced a second time and back in the city, asking her editor at the *Voice* for a job. "He said, 'You're a neurotic Jewish girl, you produce only one piece a year, how can I give you a job?'" she writes. "I said no, not any more, I'd do whatever he wanted—and as it turned out, I meant it. Two assignments later the job was mine."

By the late 1960s, Gornick was equipped with a number of lenses

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE WINNER OF THE
DRUE HEINZ LITERATURE PRIZE
CAROLINE KIM

The PRINCE of MOURNFUL THOUGHTS and OTHER STORIES
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ON SALE OCTOBER 6

"*The Prince of Mournful Thoughts and Other Stories* is an extraordinary collection, and the title story alone is an astonishing feat.... [Kim] has a devastating sense of dramatic timing, a keen ear for dialogue, and experiments constantly, with structure, minimalism, science fiction, historical fiction, returning always with insight, intelligence, and an expansive sense of their characters's humanity, which in turn points us to our own. These characters will live in my head a long time. And the prince is etched in my imagination forever."
– ALEXANDER CHEE

"Caroline Kim's captivating story collection gathers an entrancing variety of voices spread across time and place.... Deeply moving and affecting, these stories and their heartfelt characters will linger long after the last page is turned."
– EUGENIA KIM

"From the Korean-English rendering, its own work of translation, to the historical recollection as well as the futuristic therapy robots, Kim blends genre and form for daring conversions, as if a scientist who conducts experiments on the essential truths of humanity."
– E.J. KOH

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through which she could understand the world. The Marxism of her childhood set a high bar for clarity and breadth. Literature complicated the picture, loosening the hold of "the sole reality of the system" on her mind. Existentialism, first encountered in college, eroded lingering notions of an essential self. Then came psychoanalysis. Gornick is a little cagey in her memoirs about when she began to see an analyst, but she drops hints in her critical writings. In the *The Men in My Life*, she writes:

> I entered college, and somewhere in my junior year something interesting happened: a drama of internal anguish that subsumed all else began to unfold. The words "anxiety" and "depression" entered my vocabulary.... In no time at all an unimagined universe of interiority opened before me, one equipped with its own theory, laws, and language, and constituting a worldview that could account for: everything. This was strong stuff.

For all its depth, however, psychoanalysis did *not* account for everything. Gornick was still "abstract" to herself, for reasons she could not describe. Then, in 1969, the *Voice* assigned her a piece on the "women's libbers" gathering on Bleecker Street. ("What's a women's libber?" she asked.) Within days she had met Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, Ti-Grace Atkinson, and other downtown feminists, and emerged from the assignment a convert. Feminism struck Gornick like an epiphany: here, finally, was the lens that clarified her to herself.

The feminists' argument was simple. From childhood on, women were taught not to "take their brains seriously," and so they pinned the needs of their egos on love, marriage, and motherhood. When those failed to satisfy, they took it as a personal failure. But overinvestment in heterosexual achievement was not a natural product of women's "peculiar child-bearing properties" or their "so-called unique capacity for loving." Not at all: it was a rational response to an architecture of law, economy, and custom so deep that it worked on the mind undetected, coercing women into reproductive roles when it wasn't forcing them outright. So great was the damage that when other means of self-realization did present themselves—in work, politics, or art—women hardly knew what to do. Gornick wrote in her article for the *Voice*, "The Next Great Moment in History Is Theirs,"

> We have never been taught to expect the development of what is best in ourselves because no one has ever expected *anything* of us—or for us.... In order to live you've got to have nerve, and we were stripped of our nerve before we began.

This was a psychological argument for feminism that spoke directly to Gornick's paralysis of will. There was much in it to object to: the generalizing sweep of the "we"; the comparison of women's "inertia of spirit" to that of "the American black," which seems to preclude the possibility of being both. It is only fair to say that Gornick misrepresented the situation of Black women, whose oppression, the feminist Frances Beal wrote in her pamphlet *Double Jeopardy* that same year, was more than "an intellectual persecution alone." ("The movement is not a psychological outburst for us," Beal continued; "it is tangible; we can taste it in all our endeavors.")

But somewhere between Gornick's own person and "half the members of the human race" was a considerable number of women for whom she did speak: mostly white women, often middle class, who saw their experiences reflected in one another's to an uncanny degree. "I found myself daily uncovering evidence of a culture within that had been hidden, so to speak, in plain sight," she writes in *The Solitude of Self: Thinking About Elizabeth Cady Stanton*.

WOMEN STRIKE FOR PEACE- AND EQUALITY!
I'M NO BREEDER FOR THE MAN'S WAR
SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL- END THE WAR!
WOMEN STRIKE FOR PEACE
THE WOMEN OF VIETNAM ARE OUR SISTERS
WOMEN STRIKE FOR PEACE

Eugene Gordon/New-York Historical Society/Getty Images

Demonstrators at the Women's Strike for Equality, New York City, August 26, 1970

All men possessed an internal "psychic energy," Gornick wrote in that 1969 *Voice* article, that if left unexpressed caused them to "shrivel up and die." Women were no different. Yes, a revolution in legal rights was in order. ("Did you know," she wrote, "that rape by a husband is legal, but if a woman refuses to sleep with her husband she is subjected to legal suit?") A revolution in consciousness promised more. Women had lived a half-life so that men "might gain the courage to pursue a whole one." To set the record straight—to describe the world as it really was—required seeing everything anew. Gornick stood at the threshold of this enterprise and felt she had arrived—"as though light and music were bursting across the top of my skull.... Life felt good then."

For the next eight years she was a writer "on the barricades for radical feminism." More than a movement or a cause, feminism for Gornick was "a profoundly new way of interpreting human experience," a "new form into which one pours old knowledge"—in other words, a new way of reading. She began to reread everything, from history ("our own, America's, the century's, *anybody*'s") to the novels she'd grown up with to biographies of accomplished women. Everywhere she looked she saw sexism. She "wrote and wrote and wrote."

How did the feminists feel, in Gornick's account? Relieved, thrilled, and enraged by the realization "that what had always been taken for symptoms of personal unhappiness and dissatisfaction . . . could just as well be ascribed to *cultural* causes." How were the feminists received? With apathy, resistance, and dismissal. To Gornick and her peers, the fact that even educated leftists blew off feminism only proved its significance. Why else would people say on the one hand that Women's Liberation was frivolous, and on the other (as one "educated, urbane, and somewhat famous" man said to Gornick) that "if Women's Liberation wins civilization will simply be *wrecked*"?

In those years, women were "the most interesting people around," Gornick wrote, "because they [were] experiencing a psychic invigoration of rediscovery." Her articles between 1969 and 1975 tell of women stopping in the street struck by insight; of breakthroughs and laughter in consciousness-raising groups (one memorable line in "Consciousness," a transcript of a meeting published in *The New York Times Magazine*, reads, "A CHORUS OF VOICES: You bit him????"); of nights sitting up past 3 AM talking "movement talk," which is

> of necessity . . . a constant intertwining of personal experience, tactical speculations (regarding activity in and out of the movement), and theoretical projections, all being fed continually through the mill of observation and analysis.

Gornick's writing from that era, published in the *Village Voice* and elsewhere, was collected in *Essays in Feminism* (1978), now out of print. Decades later, the book is striking for its optimism: "If the ERA does not pass this year, it will pass next year. Of that there can no longer be any doubt." That was in 1975. Gornick's faith in the power of individuals to transform the world through their own altered consciousness is also painful to observe. As decades of scholars have pointed out, that same emphasis on individual consciousness made feminism susceptible to appropriation by opportunists, particularly the leaders, economists, and policymakers whose selective fulfillment of feminist demands helped legitimate their political project. (Yes to women in the workforce, political representation, and the rhetoric of flexibility, opportunity, and choice; no to a family wage, a social safety net, universal child care, and reproductive justice for all.) But how was Gornick—or any feminist of the time—to know what lay ahead?

Feminism gave Gornick many things, but two in particular changed her life: the confidence to forgo romantic love and the chance to find her footing as a writer. Feminism made Gornick expressive: it gave her a voice, a style, a subject. She was prolific in her writings against dogma, which she admitted was a "somewhat obsessive preoccupation" of hers. The exclusion of lesbians in the movement was intolerable to her, but so was militant separatism. She chafed against those who imposed a party line, and took offense at the notion that women's writing could only be judged by other women. Feminism was about seeing the world with unsparing honesty. What good was it if it replaced one set of received ideas with another? Rigidity and victimhood were, to her, signs of arrested development. In her 1970 article "On the Progress of Feminism," she compared the new convert to feminism to "the novitiate into psychoanalysis," who, after "the stunning point of initial conversion," must face down the "hard, drudging *work*" of undoing one's habits of mind. Getting stuck on man-hating was like getting stuck on blaming your parents. It might be justified, but it would not give you your future.

Not everyone shared her perspective. At a two-day conference in Boston in the early 1970s, Gornick stood up to argue that patriarchy, not men, was the enemy of women's liberation. A panelist responded by pointing a finger and saying, "You're an intellectual and a revisionist!" The episode stunned Gornick—she hadn't heard these words since childhood—and gave her new compassion for the American Communists of her parents' generation. "So *this* is how it all happened," she thought, watching the dynamics of party life play out again among the feminists. In 1974 she traveled across North America to interview former CPUSA members, now in middle or old age, "about their lives, the origins of their political attachment, their years in the Communist party: seeking to reduce the abstractions." The resulting oral history, *The Romance of American Communism*—published soon after and reissued this year—reads like a series of case studies delineating a shared affliction.

Despite their different backgrounds, the Communists shared "an overriding likeness of inner circumstance." All passed through the same phases of life in the party—infatuation, disillusionment, heartbreak—and experienced themselves in the process. The more they identified with the group, "the more each one came individually alive." When former CPUSA members spoke wistfully of their years in the party, Gornick believed it was this vitality—this expressiveness—that they mourned. "Of all the emotions I've known in life," one subject says, "nothing compares with the emotion of total comradeship I knew among the fruit pickers in the Thirties, nothing else has ever made me feel as, as coherent." Another, an organizer, says, "I so loved being good at my work."

The feeling of total comradeship, of being alive, coherent, and good at one's work—how better to describe what

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Gornick loved about feminism? Perhaps she knew then it wouldn't last.

Around 1980, "the unthinkable happened": the feminist solidarity that had emboldened Gornick to write began to unravel. "Meetings became tiresome, parties less inviting," she writes in *Approaching Eye Level*. "One day I woke up to realize the excitement, the longing, the expectation of community was over."

Depressed, she turned again to literature. Literature offered company in solitude. Something about the "longing for coherence inscribed in the work"—the "haunted imagining . . . of human existence with the rift healed"—gave Gornick "courage for life." The insights of feminism had altered her, but "ideology alone" could not cure her of "the pathological self-doubt that seemed every woman's bitter birthright." Work was the only cure. She commanded herself to sit down at the desk. From the wall, a quote stared back at her, paraphrased from a letter Anton Chekhov wrote to a friend. "What aristocratic writers take from nature gratis," the original reads, "the less privileged must pay for with their youth." He then gives himself a prompt:

> Write a story about a young man, the son of a serf . . . raised on respect for rank, kissing the priests' hands, worshipping the ideas of others. . . . Write about how this young man squeezes the slave out of himself drop by drop and how, on waking one fine morning, he finds that the blood coursing through his veins is no longer the blood of a slave, but that of a real human being.

Gornick had tacked a version of this last line above her desk in the early 1970s: "Others have made me a slave, but I must squeeze the slave out of myself, drop by drop." What men were born with, women had to struggle to attain, and only through unlearning the adaptive behaviors of the subordinated sex could they become full people. In a 1973 essay on women's fiction for the *Voice*, Gornick wrote that "the business of contemporary feminism" is "the re-creation in women of the experiencing self": the "absence of that self is the slave that must be squeezed out drop by drop." For female writers, that meant laying down their defensive postures, from aloofness (Joan Didion) to "tough" pseudo-honesty (Lois Gould) to retreat from what was hot to the touch (Anne Roiphe, Margaret Drabble). "Rarely in the work now being written by women does one feel the presence of writers genuinely penetrating their own experience," wrote Gornick, "risking emotional humiliation and the facing-down of secret fears." Like Chekhov in his letter, she seemed to be instructing herself.

But in the 1980s, the quote took on new meaning for her. It was no longer the work of deconditioning that held Gornick's attention, but the "miserable daily effort" of showing up at the desk to write, even if it meant a low yield. In 1983 Gornick published *Women in Science*, the fruit of one hundred interviews with female scientists, which marked a turning point in her work. She was fascinated by how much the scientist's inner life resembled the writer's: both ruminated "continuously on the nature of physical or imaginative life"; both endured "grinding, repetitive" work in hopes of breaking through. Both caught insight by surprise—in the shower, at 3 in the morning—and felt elation and relief when they did. Gornick was moved by the perseverance of the women who had occupied "peripheral, often humiliating positions" for decades just to feel the pleasure of their own minds at work. It was "touching and important that this information was coming to me through women," she wrote. "Art, science, feminism: they came to seem metaphors for each other."

To "squeeze the slave out of oneself" thus came to mean something closer to the persistence of the scientists, for whom failure was a given and labor a reward in itself. Like the Communists, the scientists refined Gornick's understanding of the expressive self. Possibly they gave her even more. In describing how their mothers urged them to get an education only to feel betrayed when they became scientists, the women Gornick interviewed gave her the occasion to think about Bess. In the book, she observes that "every woman receives a mixed message about love and work in her youth"—the germ of essays to come. Then, casually, she pivots to an ecologist's work on trees. The trees were growing in clumps, the ecologist explained, because winds were too low to disperse their seeds far. Baby trees grew close to the mother, and, for mysterious reasons, were dying. The ecologist discovered the cause: a pervasive infection "emanating from the mother" that "was killing off the ones growing close beside her." The trees with more distance survived.

Within a few years, Gornick was writing *Fierce Attachments*, the memoir about her mother that would be her first masterpiece. In it she found her narrator, a proxy-voice that gave her the distance she needed from her subject: close enough to see the main players, far enough to see past their contours.

No writer is without flaws. Gornick's is repetition. Take, for instance, the range of experiences she describes as having no parallel: there is the joy of writing well ("not an 'I love you' in the world could touch it"), the clarity of scientific discovery ("there is not an 'I love you' in the world that can touch it"), feminism in the early 1970s ("not an I-love-you in the world could touch it"), the companionship of books ("nothing can match it"), and the inner clarity of the expressive radical ("no reward of life, neither love for fame nor wealth could compete"). More substantial repetitions appear across multiple books, which Gornick has come to acknowledge. In a slightly defensive note at the beginning of *Unfinished Business*, she warns the reader that some paragraphs, indeed entire pages, may be familiar from previous books, adding, "I sincerely hope the reader will not find this practice off-putting."

I did not want to be the kind of reader who found it off-putting. Encountering the same paragraphs in two, three, or four different books, however, eventually took its toll. *Does she think I'm not listening? Have I read this before? Surely I am losing my mind?* I cross-checked books, dog-eared pages. Above all I wanted the repetitions to signify. Occasionally, they did. The most repeated passage in the Gornick oeuvre is a version of her theory of the expressive self: a now familiar observation about writers, artists, and radicals for whom the inexpressive life is not worth living. Gornick is a Romantic in that she prizes the individual, but she is also, as the panelist said, an intellectual and a revisionist—if not in the sense that was meant. She is a harsh critic of her own writing, and admits to being pained by the excesses of her early work (the "emotionalism is so thick you can cut it with a knife"; "where one word would do, three are sure to appear"). When a piece of understanding resists revision, appearing in the old form in a new book, it has the stubborn, polished quality of calcified thought. Are these relics of hard-won wisdom or hang-ups she can't let go of? It's left to the reader to decide.

In the thirty-three years since *Fierce Attachments* was published, Gornick has continued in the genres she first discovered as a writer for the *Voice*: memoir, criticism, biography. Her prose has become tighter, more wrought, which suits her: the tension between her grand themes and compact prose recreates in the reader the combustion of original thought. Her gifts for synthesis and analysis—both harder than they look—are clearest in her biographies. From the immaculate *The Solitude of Self*: *Thinking About Elizabeth Cady Stanton* to the surprisingly funny *Emma Goldman* to the capsule portraits in *The End of the Novel of Love* and *The Men in My Life*, Gornick captures the vital parts of a person's life—the story in each person's situation—with the few, decisive strokes of a drawing master. All those portraits of Communists and scientists were not for nothing. Take the first lines of this essay on George Gissing:

> One of the great neurotics among nineteenth-century English urban novelists is George Gissing, a writer whose damaged ego forced him into an isolation of his own making from which, paradoxically, came books of immense social intelligence, motivated by the keenest of psychological insights.

Or this paragraph from one on Allen Ginsberg:

> Allen Ginsberg was born in Newark, New Jersey . . . to Louis and Naomi Ginsberg. The father was a published poet, a high school teacher, and a socialist; the mother an enchanting free spirit, a passionate communist, and a woman who lost her mental stability in her thirties. Ultimately, she was put in an institution and lobotomized.

How's that for getting to the point?

The job of the capsule biographer was perhaps made easier for Gornick by her choice of subjects. Most were writers, activists, and thinkers for whom "the work" was everything, as it was for her. Her presence isn't obtrusive, but it is noticeable, like a person's faint reflection in a darkening window. Some might find it detracts from the view, but to me, it clarifies her subjects. George Gissing's neurotic solitude, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's passion for women's rights, Randall Jarrell's responsiveness to literature, James Baldwin's psychological acuity—all speak to Gornick's inner life, and help her to animate theirs. ☐

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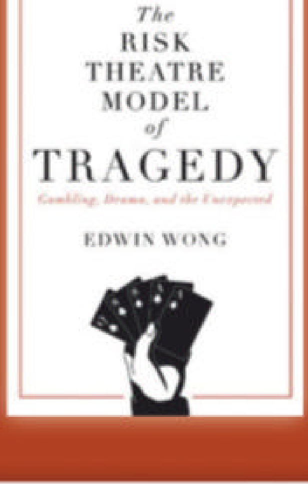


The Cults of Wagner

Jed Perl

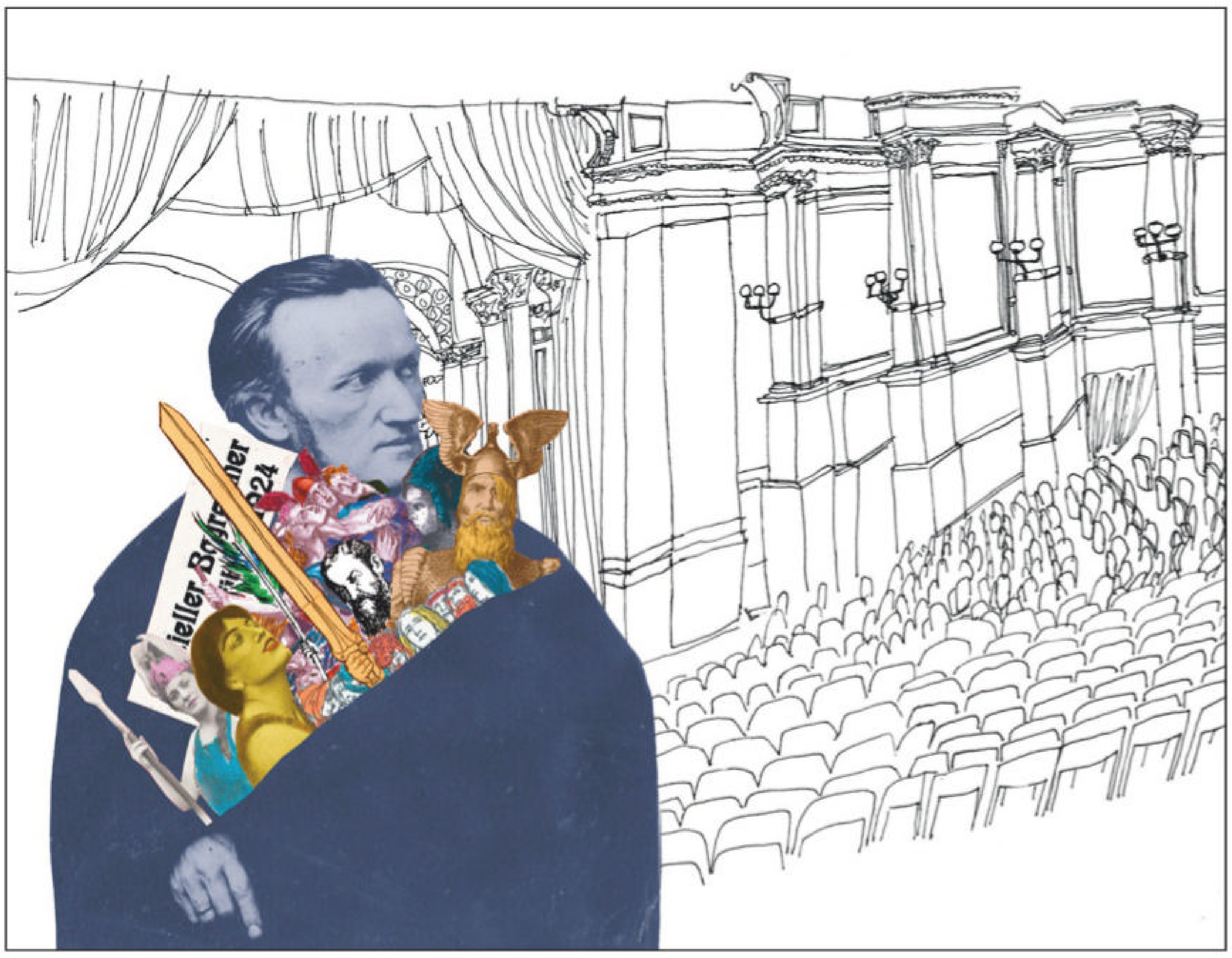
Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music
by Alex Ross.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
769 pp., $40.00

Alex Ross, who has been the classical music critic at *The New Yorker* since 1996, can make readers feel they're right next to him in the concert hall or the opera house, sharing his excitement. Whether his subject is a singer in a classic role or a new composition by a young composer, Ross is engaged, informed, even avid. Writing about Ferruccio Busoni's enormous five-movement piano concerto, he describes this "gaudy, unapologetically over-the-top piece" as "a remarkable feat of controlled chaos." He responds to Busoni's virtuosity with his own virtuosic roll call of sources and inspirations, praising Busoni's "Lisztian arpeggios, brooding spells of Wagnerian orchestration, delicate Chopinesque interludes, depressive Schumannesque detours, and madcap Rossinian crescendos." Ross grasps the imaginative daring of Busoni's wild ride of a concerto. He's also having some fun: intellectual fun. For Ross—and for many of his readers—that's part of what concertgoing is about.

More than a dozen years ago Ross published his first book, *The Rest Is Noise*, a deft, inviting survey of twentieth-century music that built on many of his gifts and became something of a best seller. Although I found it a little too breezy in places, I understood Ross's determination to give what many regard as modern music's thorny history a less strenuous presentation. He followed *The Rest Is Noise* with an essay collection, *Listen to This*, and has now produced his most ambitious book, *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*. There's nothing breezy about it. In more than 650 tightly packed pages, Ross explores the impact of Richard Wagner's art and ideas from his own time down to the present.

Ross has much that's interesting to say about the responses to Wagner's controversial, wide-ranging, and widely circulated writings about art, nationalism, anti-Semitism, and any number of other topics; he's attentive to Wagner's early anarchist and leftist views; and, of course, he devotes many pages to the embrace of Wagner's music and ideas by Hitler and the Third Reich. He's generous when it comes to citing the work of a great many scholars who have explored Wagner's influence on generations of literary figures and on social and political issues and movements. Ross goes overboard in demonstrating his scholarly credentials; he didn't need to discuss the plots and themes of quite so many novels, theatrical events, and movies in which Wagner's operas make some sort of appearance. At times *Wagnerism* seems not a sustained narrative but an encyclopedia of everything related to Wagner.

Like so many of the *isms* we reach for to explain forces in the political, social, economic, and cultural realms, "Wagnerism" is a term that takes on radically different meanings and implications depending on who is using it—and when, why, and how. At the beginning of his book, Ross writes that after Wagner's death in Venice in 1883, there developed a "chaotic posthumous cult that came to be known as Wagnerism." By the time he is finished, Wagnerism has turned out to be both a good thing and a bad thing, by turns exhilarating and demoralizing, a cult but also a source of artistic inspiration. The fluidity of the idea seems to be what Ross likes about it. He regards Wagnerism as a transnational and maybe even a universal obsession; a reader may begin to wonder whether some of his subjects were as obsessed with the composer as he is. The danger with *isms* is that they can be too loosely and easily applied—in the case of Wagnerism, to everything from movies to sporting events to monsoons.



Richard Wagner; illustration by Joanna Neborsky

The strongest pages in *Wagnerism*—they come in the final third of the book, mostly in the chapter "Siegfried's Death"—deal with the complex position of Wagner in Hitler's imagination, Nazi Germany, and the Allied countries before, during, and immediately after World War II. Ross brings a feeling for historical paradox and ambiguity to this prototypical case study in the relationship among art, society, and politics. He explores the long-running scholarly debates about what he refers to as "the Wagner-Hitler problem." Addressing scholarly discussions as to whether Hitler's obsession with Wagner was dominated by a rapturous engagement with the operas themselves or an enthusiasm for Wagner's writings on anti-Semitism and the German spirit, Ross concludes that "Hitler's relationship with Wagner remained one of musical fandom rather than of ideological fanaticism."

Whatever attracted him most strongly to Wagner, Hitler was determined to make him central to the iconography and mythology of Nazism, though the composer and his work were not wholeheartedly embraced by the citizens of the Third Reich. Wagner "was too strange, too eccentric, to serve as a reliable ideological bulwark" in Nazi Germany, Ross writes. "Nor was his work popular enough, in the mass-market sense, to operate as a unifying force." The Bayreuth Festival, the center of the Wagner cult, which was founded in 1876 to perform the composer's works—and no one else's, though an exception was made for Beethoven's Ninth Symphony—drew at least as much of an international audience as a German one.

Although European and American operagoers, including many Jewish Wagnerites, had been aware of rising anti-Semitism in and around the festival since its post–World War I reopening in 1924, it was only after Hitler's appointment as chancellor in 1933 that foreign ticket sales dropped precipitously. "Hitler," Ross writes, "stepped in to save the festival." He saw to it that the performances remained well attended, often filling seats with what Ross refers to as a "fictitious audience" of party members and students who had no interest in what they may well have regarded as highfalutin music. As for the claims that Wagner's music was played in the concentration camps, Ross examines them carefully and concludes that if it happened, it was only rarely. "The vast majority of survivor testimonies," he writes, "indicate that the music of the camps was popular in nature: marches, dance tunes, hits of the day, light classics."

In looking at Wagner, Hitler, and Nazism, Ross finds himself debunking what he later describes as "the habit, widespread in the Anglophone world, of treating nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German history as an extended preamble to the Nazi calamity," with "Wagner as Hitler's precursor." His studies have led him to conclude "that the backshadowing narrative was too simplistic." Attitudes toward German culture in the non-German world had long been an unpredictable and sometimes uneasy mix of veneration, prejudice, and outright ignorance. One saw what one wanted to see. "During the First World War," Ross writes, "everything German had been demonized. [During World War II], the Allied countries made a point of extolling the 'good Germany.'"

Ross argues that "Wagner's popularity in America actually surged" in the 1940s. Arturo Toscanini and other conductors performed the operas before enthusiastic audiences; apparently some concertgoers didn't find it difficult to separate the nineteenth-century artist from the country that he had mythologized and that was now a sworn enemy. The *New York Times* critic Olin Downes wrote that Wagner's operas were "the antithesis of Hitler, and crushing condemnation of all that Hitlerism implies." These pages are engrossing, because Ross is cutting through simplifications and generalizations. He has a focus here that eludes him in much of the rest of the book, where he piles up so much information and makes matters so complicated that a reader may end up wondering what exactly he's getting at.

A project as vast as *Wagnerism* demands methodological clarity. In the sciences, it's taken for granted that the significance of your conclusions is shaped by the strength of the hypotheses with which you begin and the soundness of the evidence you select and the procedures you follow. The same is true in the humanities. Ross may be acknowledging this, at least in principle, when he observes that "Wagner first interested me as a problem." The problem he has in mind, as best I can understand it, is that Wagner has meant a great many different things to a great many different people. Within a few pages he suggests that Wagner has been—or can be—seen as "the cultural-political unconscious of modernity," "the presiding spirit of the bourgeois century," "the Leviathan of the fin de siècle," and even "a cultural atrocity—the Muzak of genocide." The term "Wagnerian," he explains, initially "denoted a follower or fan. Later, it marked an artistic quality, an aesthetic tendency, a cultural symptom."

Ross presents these broad statements about Wagner's significance near the beginning of his book. He appears to be setting out to write a history of Wagner's influence and the shifting understanding of his art. But evidently he had something even bigger in mind. While a straightforward methodological approach to the subject would assume that Wagner's operas are stable facts that have been seen from a variety of different vantage points, Ross maneuvers the blizzard of information in such a way as to suggest that the work of art itself is porous, unstable—not a fixed fact but a forever shifting target. As far as Ross is concerned, the reactions to Wagner and his music become a form of feedback that reshapes the music. Deep into his book he finds support in Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author," where the argument that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" leads him to observe that this "follows naturally from the interpretive pandemonium of Wagnerism."

I would have expected Ross to want to find some order in this "interpretive pandemonium." But the more I've thought about his book, the more I'm convinced that the overload of sometimes only partially digested material that he's packed into these pages is engineered to feel anarchic—maybe even nihilistic. Ross has set out to shatter Wagner's work into a million pieces. He hints at some of the reasons for this in a brief, elliptical, and improvisational "Postlude," in which all pretense of historical analysis is abandoned and he embraces something closer to psychology or even self-analysis. Some readers may be relieved to discover, at the end of this long and difficult book, a few snapshots of Ross's own evolving interest in Wagner, which began when he was a ten-year-old boy and experienced "an almost physical unease," "a kind of auditory seasickness" when he listened to the recording of *Lohengrin* he'd taken out of the library. "Embarrassingly," he tells us,

> I associate early experiences of the *Ring* with the ups and downs of various crushes and love affairs. More than once I sat next to another young man at a Wagner performance, likening myself to Tristan, Isolde, or, on bad days, Alberich.

He goes on to write that Wagner has "brought revelations of my stupidity, my self-pity, my absurdity—in other words, my humanity."

What Ross is alluding to here, in a witty, self-deprecating way, is one of the central questions in aesthetics, namely to what extent the emotions elicited by works of art do or do not echo, parallel, and diverge from the emotions we experience in other areas of our lives. That these fragmentary reflections are what Ross has chosen to offer as something approaching a conclusion suggests that his interest in Wagner and Wagnerism has all along been fueled less by historical concerns than by philosophical ones. It may be that what he has been looking for as he examines the thinking of 150 years' worth of artists, writers, philosophers, and politicians is some ultimate confirmation that his own ambivalence about Wagner's achievement reflects an ambivalence that's inherent in the music. What Ross believes, simply put, is that since life is disorderly, then art must be disorderly, too.

"In Wagner's vicinity," Ross announces in his next-to-last paragraph, "the fantasy of artistic autonomy falls to pieces and the cult of genius comes undone. Amid the wreckage, the artist is liberated from the mystification of 'great art.'" Artistic autonomy, Ross tells us, is a fantasy. Genius is merely a cult. "Great art"—note the skeptical or ironic quotation marks—is a mystification. Ross is certainly entitled to believe these things. But they are not historical ideas, much less historical facts—and they are not necessarily supported by the hundreds of pages of history that have preceded them. The artist, Ross goes on to say, "becomes something more unstable, fragile, and mutable. Incomplete in himself, he requires the most active and critical kind of listening." Is Ross's description of the artistic act as condemned to ambiguity meant to underscore the importance of the critic, who, whatever his own uncertainties, offers the "active and critical kind of listening" that the work of art, left to its own devices, might fail to elicit?

Ross's belief that transcendent values are illusory values fits all too easily into our embattled moment, when social and political cataclysms have understandably forced us to question many of our fundamental assumptions. He pretty much sets aside the idea that the arts have any freestanding value—an idea that was influential in the early twentieth century, went into something close to eclipse amid the social and political turmoil of the 1930s, was revived in the postwar decades, and would seem to be in near-total eclipse again now. I understand Ross's unease with theories of art that prioritize unity and purity while downplaying the multitudinous, often dissonant impulses and apprehensions that lie behind any significant work of art. But isn't there something facile in his passing reference to "the fable of modernism inventing itself *ex nihilo*, in an immaculate aesthetic conception"? It's all too easy to knock what amounts to a cartoonishly simplified version of an extraordinarily important albeit highly controversial idea about the nature of art.

Although Ross never explains how expansively he means us to understand his closing observation about "the fantasy of artistic autonomy"—is he speaking about all music, art, and literature or merely about Wagner and his "vicinity"?—I don't think he would be unhappy to have readers conclude that art can never stand alone. His book amounts to a frontal assault on what at one point he refers to as modernism's "rhetoric of purity, autonomy, and freedom." I would hasten to add that these are by no means exclusively modern or "modernist" ideas. They can be found in the artistic thinking of the Renaissance and many other periods; Meyer Schapiro discovered them in Romanesque art. Even Ross is at pains to explain that what he calls the "medium-transcending aesthetic" of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the artwork that unites many different arts on the theatrical stage—has its own qualities of distillation and purification.

But in Ross's account of the arts, purity can never stay pure for long. Life intervenes. "Purity" is a word that keeps coming up in *Wagnerism*, often in distinctly impure or disturbing contexts, as when Ross observes that there were some members of the Hitler Youth who found Wagner "lacking in Nordic purity." By the time Ross is through with him, Wagner looks anything but pure. He's shopworn, beaten up, deflated.

Does Ross's book really support the conclusions he wants to draw about Wagner in particular and, I suspect, about the arts more generally? I don't think so. Near the beginning, when discussing the varying responses to Wagner, he quotes W. H. Auden's "description of the man as 'an absolute shit.'" Ross goes on to say that "Wagner's divisiveness, his undiminished capacity to enrage and confuse, is part of his allure." This sets the stage for the more than six hundred pages that are to come. But if we look at Auden's full comment, which is found in Robert Craft's *Stravinsky: Chronicle of a Friendship*, it can lead to a very different conclusion, one that might cast doubt on Ross's investigation before it has even begun. Wagner, Auden apparently said, "was indisputably a genius, but apart from that an absolute shit." For Ross genius is nothing but a "cult." For Auden, if I understand him correctly, there is a complete separation between the music, which is pure genius, and the man, who was a shit.

So there remains an entirely different hypothesis with which Ross might have begun his studies of Wagner and his influence, namely that the music does or at least might stand apart from the man. That's how I feel after I've taken account of the bewildering variety of contradictory claims that have been made on behalf of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, *Parsifal*, *Tristan and Isolde*, and their author, many of which Ross describes at considerable length. Returning to the operas, I find myself wondering whether they are susceptible to all these divergent interpretations precisely because they're ultimately immune to each and every one of them. Why not conclude that the music survives—and triumphs—because it has an essence or power that's untouched by what anybody says? If this isn't a conclusion that readers are necessarily going to draw from Ross's book, that's at least in part because of a rather extraordinary decision he has made about what evidence he's willing to examine. He has banished from this enormous study of Wagner's influence any discussion of his influence on music or musicians.

"This is a book," Ross writes, "about a musician's influence on non-musicians—resonances and reverberations of one art form into others." I find it difficult to know what to make of this assertion, considering that Ross—who is, after all, a music critic—writes about his chosen subject with such feeling and lucidity. At the beginning of *Wagnerism*, invoking the prelude to *Das Rheingold*, he describes how the double basses and bassoons create "an emanation of primordial nature, the hum of the cosmos at rest," and then how, as other instruments join in, "the prolonged stasis engenders a new sense of time." There are many pages in *Wagnerism* where Ross brings his considerable descriptive powers to bear on the subtle beauties of the music. Nevertheless, he has set up a situation in which music as music, including Wagner's music, will inevitably be overwhelmed by everything else. He wants to know what African-Americans, feminists, gay people, aesthetes, nationalists, Jews, anti-Semites, philo-Semites, and just about everybody else has thought about Wagner. But for the purposes of *Wagnerism*, he has decided that musicians are excluded.

Ross may not believe that music can stand on its own. If so, he's certainly not alone. But in a historical study as wide-ranging and detailed as *Wagnerism*, one has to ask whether there are good reasons for the choice he has made. Doesn't he risk prejudging the case when he rejects—at least within the scope of this book—the possibility that Wagner's afterlife is at least as much the business of musicians and composers as of writers and politicians? He must recognize that his refusal to discuss musical influences in this book about a musician creates some awkward situations—and even, at times, some gaping holes.

It's terrific to find Ross including, as part of his exploration of Wagner's influence on the creative life of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century France, the work of Henri Fantin-Latour, a painter who, although best known for crisp, lucid still lifes, devoted some of his subtlest thinking to beautifully elusive, sometimes almost fog-bound meditations on Wagnerian themes. Ross also discusses Cézanne's, Van Gogh's, and Gauguin's interest in Wagner. But he includes only the scantest mentions of Claude Debussy, who wrote and spoke a great deal about Wagner, both in praise and in blame. In his one completed opera, *Pelléas and Mélisande*, Debussy offered a riposte to what he sometimes described as Wagner's symphonic excess, reimagining mythic-medieval subject matter, that Wagnerian standby, as something closer to opera as Proustian chamber music.

Ross's handling of Serge Diaghilev, the Russian impresario who was a fervent Wagnerian and a pioneer in the theatrical arts through the productions of his Ballets Russes, also suffers from his refusal to discuss Wagner's musical influence. Ross devotes some space to Vaslav Nijinsky's innovative choreography. But having decided that the contributions of Debussy and Stravinsky to Nijinsky's ballets cannot be discussed at any length, Ross fatally cripples his study of the theatrical innovations of the Ballets Russes (although he can't quite resist sneaking in a few lines about Stravinsky). Diaghilev, to whom Wagner and the Bayreuth experience meant so much, was offering his own radical reconsiderations of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* through the imaginative collaborations he precipitated between composers, choreographers, and visual artists.

For all that is panoramic in *Wagnerism*, it can feel claustrophobic. As Ross takes us from George Eliot to Virginia Woolf in literature, from Sergei Eisenstein to George Lucas in film, and from W. E. B. Du Bois to Lenin's Russia in politics, he works mightily to give each portrait an individuality, but because everybody is viewed through the same lens and subjected to more or less the same interrogation, a kind of analytical fog overtakes the book. Those who weren't Wagnerites, like Oscar Wilde, are corralled as anti-Wagnerites; apparently even the anti- or non-Wagnerites can't help worrying about his work. Nobody's art or ideas are allowed to stand apart; everything becomes part of this great murky mass that is Wagnerism.

While no one who reads this book can possibly dispute the pervasiveness of Wagnerism, I don't think Ross has done enough to situate Wagner among the broader forces that were shaping the cultural and social imagination of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe. He was one of a number of titanic creative figures who flourished in that period. It may be, as Ross believes, that no other artist has had a greater impact, but I'm not sure that Wagner's position, as a prophet who shaped both the artistic and political realms, is as unique or unprecedented as the book suggests. In our disabused age—after a century during which so many hopes were shattered by two world wars, the Holocaust, the gulags, and the atom bomb—it's difficult to grasp the admiration, if not worship, with which so many people once approached the art and ideas not only of Wagner but also of Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin, Victor Hugo, Walt Whitman, George Bernard Shaw, and others. *Tolstoyan* is an adjective with implications possibly as rich and varied as *Wagnerian*. In France the notion of the creative prophet may have endured longer than anywhere else, at least in a shrunken form; both André Malraux and Jean-Paul Sartre cut dramatic figures as they moved between literature, the arts, philosophical speculation, and political action.

Wagner was by no means the only one of these giant figures who responded to the routinization and standardization of the modern world by looking to older myths, legends, and modes of behavior. For some, the backward glance was the beginning of a dream about the future—maybe even a plan for the future. Ruskin and Hugo were fascinated by the Middle Ages; Tolstoy embraced a primitive Christianity. While Wagner found his heroes and heroines in a mythological North, there were a great many artists and writers who were looking south, to the arts, myths, and legends of the Greeks and Romans. Friedrich Nietzsche—whose complex relationship with Wagner and Wagnerism naturally occupies quite a few pages of Ross's book—helped define the modern fascination with the ancient Greeks when he wrote about the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Whatever Wagner's posthumous fame, it may well be that in the decades after his death artistic attitudes were as profoundly shaped by Nietzsche's altogether independent influence. I sometimes wonder if Ross doesn't confuse Wagner's influence with Nietzsche's. Picasso—whom Ross doesn't catch in his net—was by no stretch of the imagination a Wagnerian, but his shifting moods and modes definitely reflect the influence of Nietzsche's ideas, which he encountered as a young man in bohemian Barcelona.

While a great many writers felt the power of Wagner's work, and there are some who will forever be associated with him—Shaw and Thomas Mann come immediately to mind and receive a good deal of Ross's attention—I don't think his influence was always as decisive as Ross often wants to imagine. He devotes some pages to James Joyce and the Wagnerian allusions in both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. But whatever of Wagner or Wagnerism there is in *Ulysses*, isn't it overtaken by the Homeric themes that begin with the title and pervade every aspect of the book? Even the mythomania of *Finnegans Wake* remains entirely Joyce's, an Irishman's *Gilgamesh* or *Mahabharata* with the Liffey as the River of Life. Too often in *Wagnerism* Ross presents his evidence but fails to persuade us of his case.

Ross aims to demonstrate that the novels of Willa Cather, to whom he devotes an entire chapter, exude a Wagnerian spirit. There's a good deal of evidence that might support this view. In her youth in Nebraska, Cather studied piano with a man whose father, also a musician, had been a strong supporter of Wagner and conducted a number of the operas in Germany in the 1850s. Much later, in New York, she was friends with a well-known Wagnerian soprano, Olive Fremstad. Cather knew and admired the operas. In *The Song of the Lark* and other works, she wrote brilliantly about the women who sang the great operatic roles. Even fairly casual readers of Cather will remember that one of her finest stories is entitled "A Wagner Matinée."

Ross believes that Cather's feeling for the expansive, monumental beauty of the American West—a feeling she shares with more than one of her characters—suggests an "emphasis on sensation [that] is thoroughly Wagnerian" and "a Wagnerian grandiloquence." Cather herself wrote in a letter that "the cliff dwellings had awakened [in the protagonist of *The Song of the Lark*] Thea's 'historic imagination—so necessary to a great Wagnerian singer.'" But of course that isn't quite the same thing as saying that the cliff dwellings or the emotions they awakened are Wagnerian. Ross also writes that Cather's novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* "is most Parsifal-like in its syncretic religiosity" and that in *The Professor's House* the protagonist offers a credo that "comes near to" one of Wagner's. While all this is impressive in its way, I'm sorry to say that after following Ross's argument step by step, I'm left feeling about Cather's magnificent novels exactly the way I felt before. The temper, texture, and power of her particular union of naturalism and romanticism have very little to do with Wagner's resplendent tall tales.

If Ross's criticism in *The New Yorker* often feels celebratory in spirit, his work in *Wagnerism*, where he aims to drill deeper and deeper into Wagner's work along with the work of many other creative spirits, leaves me feeling that he's cutting the artists down to size. "It is never," he writes at the end of his book, "a matter of beauty proving eternal." "We may catch glimpses of some higher realm," he continues, "but it is only a shadow on the wall, an echo from the pit." Is the experience of art ultimately such a downer? Ross ends his book by writing that after "the curtain falls," "we shuffle back in silence to the world as it is." For all that he has to say about the shifting reputation of Wagner and Wagnerism, doesn't he recognize that the operas remain brilliantly independent, works to be sung and played, admittedly with different interpretations, but all hopefully controlled by the words and notes on the page? I wish that Ross had more faith in the possibility of artistic autonomy, great art, and, yes, genius. ☐

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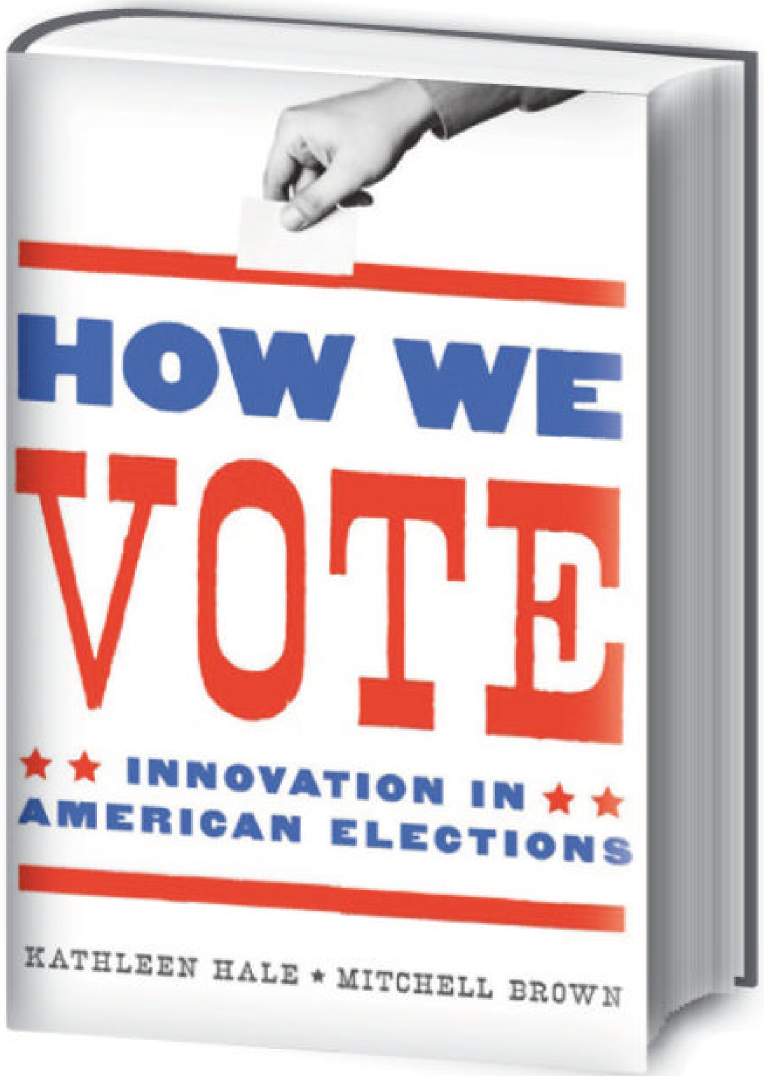
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Simulating Democracy

James Gleick

If Then: How the Simulmatics Corporation Invented the Future
by Jill Lepore.
Liveright, 415 pp., $28.95

“Which category have they put *you* in?”

This sinister question—at least, it was meant to sound sinister—headlined the advertising copy for *The 480*, a 1964 novel by Eugene Burdick. His previous best sellers, *The Ugly American* and *Fail-Safe*, had caused sensations in political circles, and the new one promised to do the same. Its jacket featured the image of a punched card. The title referred to 480 categories of voter, defined by region, religion, age, and other demographic characteristics, such as “Midwestern, rural, Protestant, lower income, female.” Many readers recoiled from the notion of being sorted into one of these boxes. *The New York Times*’s reviewer called *The 480* a “shock novel” and found it implausible.

What was so shocking? What was implausible? The idea that a company might use computer technology and behavioral science to gather and crunch data on American citizens, with the nefarious goal of influencing a presidential election.

In the 1950s and 1960s this seemed like science fiction. Actually, *The 480* was a thinly disguised roman à clef, based on a real-life company called Simulmatics, which had secretly worked for the 1960 campaign of John F. Kennedy. Burdick had been a political operative himself and knew the Simulmatics founders well. The company’s confidential reports and memoranda went straight into his prose. And the 480 categories—listed in an appendix to the novel—were the real Simulmatics voter types, the creation of what one of its founders called “a kind of Manhattan Project gamble in politics.”

Simulmatics was founded in 1959 and lasted eleven years. Jill Lepore mentioned its involvement in the Kennedy campaign in *These Truths* (2018), her monumental history of the United States; she was already on the trail of the story she tells in her new book, *If Then*. Lepore is a brilliant and prolific historian with an eye for unusual and revealing stories, and this one is a remarkable saga, sometimes comical, sometimes ominous: a “shadow history of the 1960s,” as she writes, because Simulmatics stumbled through the decade as a bit player, onstage for the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the Great Society, the riots and protests. It began with grand ambitions to invent a new kind of predictive behavioral science, in a research environment increasingly tied to a rising defense establishment amid the anxiety of the cold war. It ended ignominiously, in embarrassment and bankruptcy.

Irving Kristol, the future architect of neoconservativism, dismissed Simulmatics in 1964 as “a struggling little company which, despite the fact that it worked on a few problems for the Kennedy organization in 1960, has since had a difficult time making ends meet,” and he wasn’t wrong. Today it is almost completely forgotten. Yet Lepore finds in it a plausible untold origin story for our current panopticon: a world of constant surveillance, if not by the state then by megacorporations that make vast fortunes by predicting and manipulating our behavior—including, most insidiously, our behavior as voters.

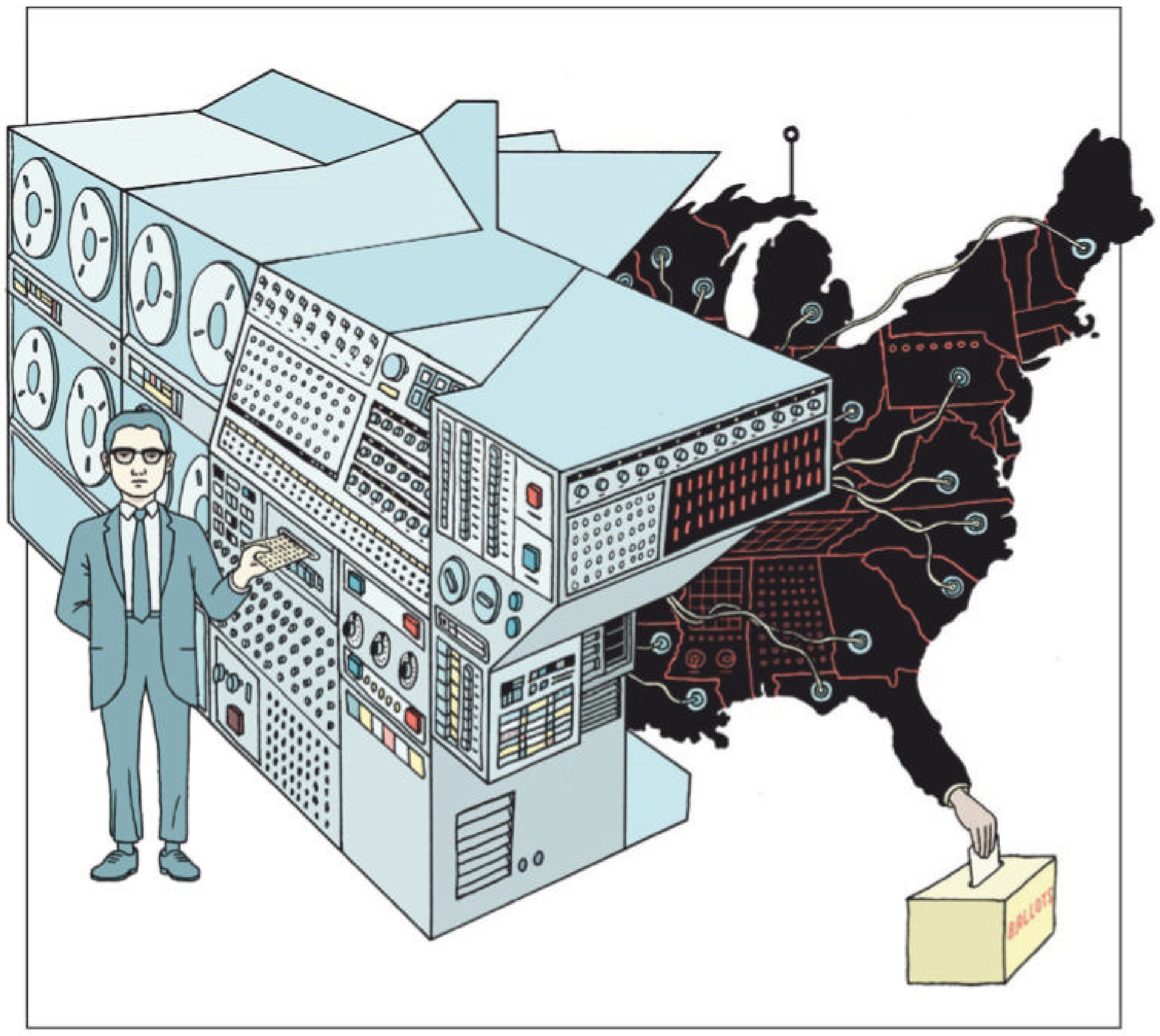

Illustration by Anders Nilsen

The name “Simulmatics”—a mashup of “simulation” and “automatic”—was the kind of faux-sophisticated compound that tech startups favored (Teledyne, Biotronik, Microsoft), before a 1990s countertrend led to names like Yahoo, Google, and Twitter. Simulmatics’s creator and president was a former Madison Avenue advertising and public relations executive, Edward L. Greenfield—a glad-handing, scotch-drinking, Pall Mall–smoking huckster, as Lepore describes him. Greenfield saw national politics as virgin territory for a scientifically minded advertising business.

This was a fairly new idea. In 1952 the eloquent and erudite Democratic nominee, Adlai Stevenson, objected to paying professionals for tools of mass persuasion, while Dwight D. Eisenhower became the first presidential candidate ever to appear in television commercials. A word on people’s lips that year was “brainwashing,” coined by Edward Hunter, the rabidly anti-Communist author of *Brain-Washing in Red China: The Calculated Destruction of Men’s Minds* (1951). Stevenson wanted no part of that. Republicans spent $1.5 million on television advertising, which seems like a pittance until you learn that the Democrats spent $77,000.

Computers at the time were house-sized machines built from thousands of vacuum tubes, with tanks of liquid mercury serving as “memory.” The largest computer in the world, produced by the Remington Rand corporation for the Census Bureau, was UNIVAC. CBS News hired it for election night—Walter Cronkite called it “that miracle of the modern age, the electronic brain.” It was not just going to tally the numbers as they came in; it was meant to predict the outcome before the final results were known. “This is not a joke or a trick,” said his colleague Charles Collingwood. “It’s an experiment, and we think it’s going to work. We don’t know, we hope it will work.” Collingwood referred to the computer as “he”: “He’s sitting there in his corner, humming away. A few minutes ago I asked him what his prediction was, and he sent me back a very caustic answer.” In fact, UNIVAC’s operators saw early in the evening that Eisenhower seemed to be winning in a landslide, but they weren’t brave enough to trust their computer.

The pioneers of computing had a dream application for a machine capable of performing rapid calculations on large amounts of data: weather forecasting. Atmospheric behavior is just physics, and the relevant equations were well known. At the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, John von Neumann argued that computers would soon enable humans not only to predict the weather but to control it. He believed in a degree of perfection that we now know is unreachable, because the weather is a chaotic system, but the methods he invented are used in the supercomputers that run nonstop at all the world’s meteorological centers. Computers predict the weather by simulating it: by creating models and letting them run.

Ed Greenfield, the ad man, saw no reason not to try the same approach with the behavior of people. He created a Social Science Division in his company, with the idea of simulating the entire electorate and selling voting predictions to campaigns. He hired a computer guy and a social scientist, Bill McPhee and Ithiel de Sola Pool, and Eugene Burdick, then a political scientist. All of them grew obsessed in one way or another with the possibility of mathematizing human behavior. McPhee was ebullient about programming: “The computers (Univac, Manniac + ‘Johnniac’—I work on Johnniac) are just like big electric trains for grown-up boys.” Pool was working on a theory of “social networks.” He had a notion that “any two Americans, of any sort, can be linked by a chain of six acquaintanceships or less”—six degrees of separation, one might say.

Who were these people? “They were midcentury white liberals in an era when white liberals were not expected to understand people who weren’t white or liberal,” Lepore says. She calls them—they sometimes called themselves—the What-If Men. Deeply researched, written with elegance and passion, *If Then* gives a vivid picture of their lives, including their often miserable wives, suffering “the bad bargains of the middle-class marriages of the 1950s.” In *The 480*, Burdick describes the Simulmatics men as a “new underworld”:

> Innocent and well-intentioned people who work with slide rules and calculating machines and computers.... Most of these people are highly educated, many of them are Ph.D.s, and none that I have met have malignant political designs on the American public. They may, however, radically reconstruct the American political system, build a new politics, and even modify revered and venerable American institutions—facts of which they are blissfully innocent.

Greenfield wanted to build a “Voting Behavior Machine.” He also called it a “People Machine.” It would treat voters as “discrete units at the ‘microscopic’ level,” and it would create a “macroscopic picture of how, when it is all put together, the aggregate system works.” For the first time, large quantities of data had been gathered through the booming business of political polling. When Greenfield and his team formed Simulmatics in advance of the 1960 election, they bought the results of Gallup polls from the past four national elections, 100,000 surveys on punched cards. They sorted the questions into fifty “issue attitudes,” and they sorted the people into demographic boxes.

First they tried selling their services to Stevenson, their favorite among the potential Democratic candidates. They proposed to test policy positions in the machine before revealing them to actual voters. Should the candidate speak out for civil rights in the South? “We will, from our model, be able to predict what such a speech would mean to each of 1,000 sub-groups of the population...and consequently to pinpoint the state where it could affect the electoral vote,” Greenfield wrote. This was liable to strike some as cynical or sneaky. It should strike us as a description of what every technically astute political consultant offers today.

When the nomination went instead to Kennedy, they sent their pitch to his campaign. It went like this:

> With speed, accuracy, precision, and efficiency, simulation provides a unique test tube for the political strategist. *Before* he acts, it tells him what would be the effect of his handling of certain issues on the voting behavior of the electorate.

And like this:

> The relationship between such current intelligence and a simulation model developed out of historical data is analogous to the relationship between current weather information and a climatological model.

The Kennedy team commissioned three reports—urgently, because, for the first time, the rival candidates had agreed to televised debates, and the dates were approaching.

The Simulmatics men worked fast. No one can say now how much of their advice came from the computer, an IBM 704 at Columbia University, and how much was old-fashioned political savvy. "There's a lot of bluster and nonsense in the archival trail left behind by flimflam men," as Lepore says. But the advice seems to have been good. Black voters were grossly underrepresented in the 480 categories because George Gallup and other pollsters had avoided surveying them—meekly accepting the reality of Jim Crow voter suppression and kowtowing to southern newspaper owners who expressly did not want Blacks polled. But Simulmatics counted them and made the case that Democrats could not win without supporting the civil rights movement. They also advised the candidate to speak out frankly about the anti-Catholicism that dogged his campaign. And they urged him to treat the debates as an opportunity: "The danger to Nixon is that Kennedy can make use of his more personable traits—including a range of emotions such as fervor, humor, friendship, and spirituality." Kennedy did everything Simulmatics suggested, and when he carried off his narrow victory in November, the What-If Men were sure they deserved the credit.

And that was it. The sum total of Simulmatics's intervention in this (or any) political campaign amounted to a few bits of advice, ostensibly computer-generated but really, at most, computer-assisted. No voters were manipulated or deceived. No one's privacy was invaded.

The Kennedy team thought they had bought confidential research reports, but the Simulmatics people were desperate for publicity. One of them, Thomas B. Morgan—a friend of Ed Greenfield who had helped him edit the three reports—approached *Harper's* pretending to be a disinterested journalist, and the magazine featured his sensational account in January 1961, the month of Kennedy's inauguration. "The People-Machine," screamed the headline. "The First Report on a Computing Device Secretly Designed for the Democratic Presidential Campaign—and on Its Consequences for Political Strategy." It was a puff piece posing as an exposé. It quoted another Greenfield friend, the Yale political scientist Harold Lasswell, as saying, "This is the A-bomb of the social sciences."

All hell broke loose. United Press International reported:

> A secretly designed robot campaign strategist nicknamed a "people-machine" was said today to have been put to work by President-Elect John F. Kennedy's top advisers to suggest alternative methods of influencing voters.

The New York *Herald Tribune* said Kennedy's "secret weapon" had been "a big, bulky monster called a 'Simulmatics.'" An Oregon paper editorialized, "The voters—you, me, Mrs. Jones next door, and Professor Smith at the university" were reduced "to little holes in punch cards, or whatever device our new Ruler uses." The Kennedy people panicked and tried to deny the whole thing.

These still unfamiliar machines—*thinking* machines—scared people, for good reasons and bad. Machines couldn't really think, by any definition. They were hardly monsters or robots. They might or might not be threatening to take jobs from people: Kennedy himself had warned on the campaign trail of "the growing crisis of automation—the replacement of men by machines." Even so, reliance on computers seemed an attack on human agency: you and me, reduced "to little holes in punch cards." Simulmatics hyped its own power and prowess but also tried to dampen these fears with boilerplate reassurances: "Machines can do nothing but speed up communication." By doing so, "they restore the possibility of ready discourse about important matters in large societies." Nowadays, that sounds naive. The same kind of hopeful innocence was heard again three decades later, with the rise of the Internet.

Computers were, of course, poised to grow in speed and power more rapidly than the most optimistic What-If Man could have dreamed. For Simulmatics, the promise of computing and the hope of predicting human behavior were tied together. "The scientists of the Simulmatics Corporation acted on the proposition that if they could collect enough data about enough people and feed it into a machine," Lepore writes, "everything, one day, might be predictable, and everyone, every human mind, simulated, each act anticipated, automatically, and even driven and directed, by targeted messages as unerring as missiles." For Simulmatics, Bill McPhee wrote down what he called "a set of *rules of thinking*" to "reproduce or better *simulate* the thinking behavior of voters." (That he wrote the rules from inside the psychiatric ward of Bellevue Hospital, where his wife had temporarily committed him, is the kind of detail a novelist might be ashamed to invent.)

Around the same time, the science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov began his *Foundation* series of novels, premised on the idea of a science of psychohistory. The sages who mastered this science could predict the rise and fall of empires: "Psychohistory was the quintessence of sociology; it was the science of human behavior reduced to mathematical equations."[1] Asimov's fictional future didn't need computers to predict its future—just geniuses, making magic with their formulas. The difference between Asimov and Simulmatics was that Asimov knew he was spinning a fantasy. People do not behave as predictably as billiard balls or water molecules. Atmospheric simulation relies on variables like temperature, pressure, and humidity; the science of psychology has discovered no mental or social quantities that can be defined as simply or measured as precisely. No matter how powerful our computers are, we have no scientific laws of behavior to feed them.

Having begun the 1960s with a storm of publicity, Simulmatics set out to expand its reach from campaign politics to consumer marketing. The company pitched projects to film studios and music labels, along with advertising agencies—anyone they thought might buy the notion of simulating the needs and wants of masses of consumers. It offered, Lepore writes, "a simulated population, a miniature United States, consisting of three thousand perfectly representative but entirely imaginary people." *Punch*, the British satirical magazine, mocked this new approach to reading society's mind: "*Punch* proposed that Simulmatics' Media-Mix add a few more categories," Lepore writes,

> including "dog-lover, flat-earther, doughnut dunker, milk-in-firster," so as to be able to determine, for instance, whether a new, seventy-five-cent pink ballpoint pen ink refill would be desired by consumers who shop on Wednesdays, have Republican sympathies, "fruit-juice breakfasts, bouts of depression, slight astigmatism, fitted carpets, thick eyebrows, and one or more cousins in the armed forces."

Which is all very amusing, and exactly what Facebook, Amazon, and Google do today.

The company also pursued government contracts. Its social scientist, Pool, now chairing MIT's new political science department, got the Defense Department's Advanced Research Project Agency to finance a foray into psychological warfare to be called Project ComCom, for Communist Communications. As the United States committed itself more and more deeply to the war in Vietnam, Simulmatics went there, too. After all, psychological warfare was just political persuasion militarized, and here was fertile new territory. "Vietnam is the greatest social-science laboratory we have ever had!" Pool told a colleague. Robert McNamara, the numerically oriented secretary of defense, wanted to win hearts and minds, and along with the soldiers he brought in behavioral scientists as civilian contractors.

Simulmatics and its much larger competitor, the RAND Corporation, set up shop in nearby Saigon villas. One of RAND's analysts was a former marine named Daniel Ellsberg, who later helped write and then leaked the devastating secret report known as the Pentagon Papers. These researchers were an odd presence in a

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[1] *Second Foundation* (1953; Bantam, 1991), p. 1.

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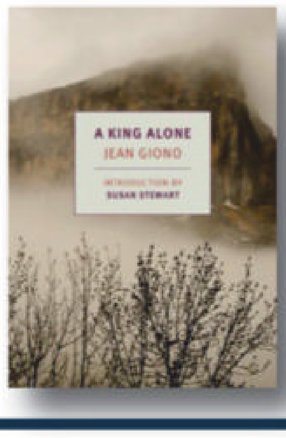

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bloody war. "Young men from RAND and Simulmatics bounded about the countryside in Land Rovers studying 'upward mobility among village elites' or 'the interrelationship of land reform with peasant political motivation,'" wrote Frances FitzGerald in her prize-winning history *Fire in the Lake.* Twenty-six years old when she arrived in Vietnam, she thought they were remarkably naive.

By Lepore's account, the Simulmatics operation was something of a clown show. Its staffers, who spoke little or no Vietnamese, got their fingers into various pieces of the US adventure, including the notorious pacification program as well as a psychological warfare project known as Chieu Hoi. These relied more on old-fashioned propaganda methods—and brutal coercion—than anything involving special data analysis. Ed Greenfield arrived in 1966 with a plan to set up a "paramilitary action research center." But the Pentagon was realizing how much the company had overpromised and how little it had done, and at the end of 1967 the team was sent home.

On their way to obscurity, the Simulmatics people played minor parts in major events, appearing Zelig-like at crucial moments of 1960s history. After race riots in Detroit, Los Angeles, and other cities, Simulmatics conducted a study for the Kerner Commission, established by Lyndon Johnson to investigate the riots and their causes. One sociologist told the commission, "Until we can predict riots with at least as much reliability as the weather forecast predicts rain or snow, it will be very difficult rationally to devise policies of control." That was a last gasp. In 1968 the company shut down for good, bankrupt. It stiffed its last consultants, including future senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. It had accomplished nothing.

What seemed frightening and even immoral fifty years ago we now mostly take for granted. We shouldn't. Facebook places its billions of customers into many more than 480 categories, based not on voluntary surveys but on pervasive surveillance. Machine-learning techniques intuit cultural "affinities" and political preferences. The algorithms sort users by location, education level, languages, financial standing, property ownership, occupation, age, gender, sexual preference, and relationship status. They track almost everything you buy, read, or watch. Facebook knows who is connected to, related to, and interested in whom.

Everyone knows about Facebook. Hardly anyone had heard of Cambridge Analytica four years ago, when it helped elect Donald Trump. Established in London by two wealthy conservatives, Robert Mercer and Steve Bannon, it pitched itself as a behavioral research and political consultancy, "operating through different vehicles, in the shadows." It offered "psychographics." It secretly harvested personal Facebook data from more than 50 million Americans, ostensibly in violation of Facebook's policies.

Through Cambridge Analytica and Trump's separate digital operation, run by Brad Parscale, users of Facebook, Google, Twitter, Snapchat, and others were targeted with thousands of messages, many of them false, continually updated and tweaked. "We bombarded them through blogs, websites, articles, videos, ads, every platform you can imagine," said one Cambridge Analytica executive:

> Until they saw the world the way we wanted them to. Until they voted for our candidate. It's like a boomerang: you send your data out, it gets analyzed, and it comes back at you as targeted messaging to change your behavior.

The Trump campaign designed negative ads to inhibit at least three categories of voter: African-Americans, former Sanders supporters, and young women who might resent Bill Clinton. Apart from all that, Trump's sometime campaign manager Paul Manafort is known to have shared sensitive polling data with his associate Konstantin Kilimnik, who has been identified by the Senate Intelligence Committee as a Russian intelligence officer.

That was 2016. This fall, a new barrage of campaign messaging is well under way, as covert and hydra-headed as ever. Cambridge Analytica is gone, but Facebook has only grown more powerful. In September, its founder and chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, announced that the company would refuse new political advertisements in the final week before the election—a token gesture that served mainly to highlight the extraordinary control one man exercises over the core communications platforms serving the United States and most of the world. Zuckerberg continues to allow, for example, videos and photographs falsified by the Trump campaign to depict Joe Biden as a dotard. Officially Facebook bars "misinformation," but the rules don't apply to political advertising.

Jaron Lanier, a virtual-reality pioneer who has become a forceful critic of social media, describes this as a "mass behavior modification machine."[2] Its power comes from a feedback loop: algorithms choose what information to present each user at each moment, aiming to catch and hold the user's attention; the user, by viewing or "liking" particular shiny objects, trains the algorithm to perform better and better. Fueling anger and outrage has proved especially effective. The machine may not be a monster, but it brings out the monsters in us. Truthfulness is of no interest to the algorithm. Facebook's goal is to get everyone addicted to Facebook, but the company also sells its manipulation services to companies with different goals. "For instance," Lanier says,

> if you're reading on a device, your reading behaviors will be correlated with those of multitudes of other people. If someone who has a reading pattern similar to yours bought something after it was pitched in a particular way, then the odds become higher that you will get the same pitch. You might be targeted before an election with weird posts that have proven to bring out the inner cynic in people who are similar to you, in order to reduce the chances that you'll vote.

Lepore's What-If Men didn't cause any of this, of course. One of them saw it coming, though, with unusual prescience. In 1968 Ithiel de Sola Pool contributed an essay to *Toward the Year 2018*, a book of "amazing predictions of what life will be like 50 years from today." Everything now filed on paper will be stored in computers, he said: "Tax returns, social security records, census forms, military records, perhaps a criminal record, hospital records, security clearance files, school transcripts . . . bank statements, credit ratings, job records." And so?

> By 2018 the researcher sitting at his console will be able to compile a cross-tabulation of consumer purchases (from store records) by people of low IQ (from school records) who have an unemployed member of the family (from social security records). That is, he will have the technological capability to do this. Will he have the legal right?

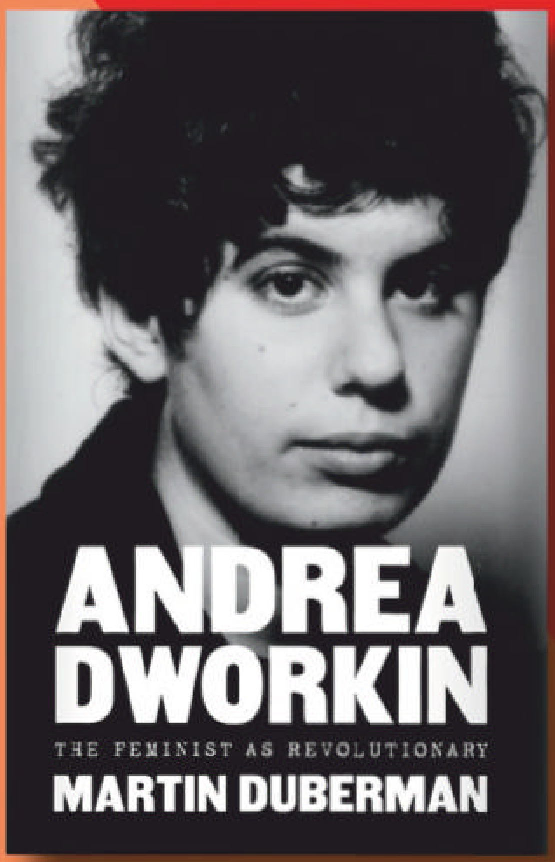
Fifty years later, we can answer Pool's question. Yes, the researcher—and the world's most powerful corporations—have the legal right to compile these dossiers. They also have the legal right to feed us a diet of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and clickbait for the benefit of marketers and unscrupulous politicians.

It didn't have to be this way. That is Lepore's final message: history is not inevitable. "Plainly, all of this might have gone differently," she says. "Plenty of people believed at the time that a people machine was entirely and utterly amoral." The Internet was born in an ethos of free-market utopia and contempt for centralized authority.

Previously, radio and then television broadcasters had submitted to federal regulation. The Federal Communications Commission had the difficult responsibility of balancing issues of free speech, fairness, and truth in advertising. But when people's personal computers gained the ability to communicate with one another as if by magic, across a worldwide web, hardly anyone wanted the government to lay its heavy hand on this free-wheeling, decentralized, individualistic phenomenon. And hardly anyone wanted to pay for information, even if it came from newspapers or books—which meant that corporate entrepreneurs turned instead to advertising and personal-data collection as sources of revenue.

"The new Internet followed no rules but many mantras," Lepore writes scornfully. "Content must be free. Media solves all problems. Data drives predictions." To this day the government has failed to establish effective rules and standards to safeguard the ownership, collection, and marketing of personal information. Facebook, Google, and Amazon all lobby hard to prevent that.

When Eugene Burdick walked away from the Simulmatics Corporation, he did leave us a warning. "This may or may not result in evil," he wrote. "Certainly it will result in the end of politics as Americans have known it." □



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[2] *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (Henry Holt, 2018), p. 33.

The Oracle of Our Unease

Sarah Churchwell

1.

In March 2020, a letter supposedly written by F. Scott Fitzgerald while "quarantined in 1920 in the south of France during the Spanish influenza outbreak" was shared on social media and quickly went viral, appropriately enough. It opens with a description of the "limpid, dreary day, hung as in a basket from a single dull star," before sighing that it's

> poignant to avoid public spaces. Even the bars, as I told Hemingway, but to that he punched me in the stomach, to which I asked if he had washed his hands. He hadn't. He is much the denier that one. Why, he considers the virus to be just influenza.

Suspiciously topical and deliberately maladroit, the letter was spoofing the pandemic discourse in the first months of 2020. Its author even identified it as a parody, but the lie flew round the world before the truth put its boots on, as Mark Twain never said.

In fact, Fitzgerald barely mentioned the Spanish flu in his writing, like most of his contemporaries, although it killed far more Americans than the Great War and he caught it himself. His case was mild, contracted in 1919 during the last of the flu's primary three waves; he made Anthony Patch endure a similar bout in *The Beautiful and Damned* for all of three sentences. But the joke of the pastiche was lost on the thousands who succumbed to the very assumptions it was burlesquing: namely, that Scott Fitzgerald always speaks for the Roaring Twenties and that history is circular.

The enduring mystique of the 1920s has lent to its centenary a singular nostalgic glamour. Although there are other fabled figures in the Twenties' pantheon—Hemingway drinking the good Cahors wine in Paris cafés, Dorothy Parker wisecracking over gin blossoms at the Algonquin, Gertrude Stein dispensing koans and eau-de-vie in the rue de Fleurus—he remains its herald to a degree that would have disconcerted and delighted him in equal measure. In particular *The Great Gatsby*, with its yellow cocktail music and blue gardens and champagne glasses bigger than finger bowls, serves as a proxy for our collective idea of the Jazz Age. All over the world, Gatsby-themed New Year's Eve galas welcomed 2020: houses from London to Melbourne, Atlanta to San Francisco, glowing to receive a thousand guests.

But this caricature of Fitzgerald as frivolous and unfailingly rhapsodic obscures the bracing acidity of his satire and the cool eye of his intelligence. The enchanted terms in which Fitzgerald portrayed modern America still blind us to how scathingly he judged it. "It was an age of satire," he wrote, and yet we suppose that the writer who both embodied the Jazz Age and identified satire as its essential feature never employed it himself. Fitzgerald's sardonic humor and his disquiet—the sense that "life is essentially a cheat and its conditions those of defeat," as he later wrote—give his best work moral realism and gravitas, grounding the flights of his prose.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zelda Fitzgerald, and their daughter, Frances, Paris, 1925

Bettmann/Getty Images

All those New Year's partygoers seem to have forgotten that the revelry ends with Gatsby dead in a swimming pool, an obscene word scrawled on the porch of his preposterous house. *Gatsby* is a cautionary tale about the consequences of misreading history, while its parties depict a society spinning out of control. The Jazz Age doesn't end well in the novel that's supposed to make it sound like so much fun.

Yet it didn't begin well, either. We should look anew at 1920 not because centenaries have magical properties but because Fitzgerald's remarkably sensitive inner ear helped him register, before almost anyone else, when America started losing its balance—and calling its vertigo "jazz." Jazz related to slang for "pep," its earliest recorded uses signifying liveliness as often as music.[1] Jazz soon became so semantically mercurial that by 1915 it denoted volatility per se; before long it stood for misrule. Unpredictability was jazz, as they would have put it: when Einstein overthrew Newtonian laws of gravity, he was said to have discovered "the jazz-molecule."

In "Echoes of the Jazz Age," his 1931 essay on the decade that had just "leaped to a spectacular death" at the end of 1929, Fitzgerald recalled finding early success merely for telling his contemporaries "that he felt as they did, that something had to be done with all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War." Jazz, he added, was that energy; it was "associated with a state of nervous stimulation, not unlike that of big cities behind the lines of a war." It is a state that readers unexpectedly catapulted into our own age of anxiety thanks to a global pandemic may suddenly be better able to apprehend. Jazz spirit in 1920 wasn't carefree: it was the hysteria of the near miss, an overwrought reaction to surviving calamity, a society going berserk because it didn't know where else to go.

2.

At the start of 1920, no one had heard of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the label "Roaring Twenties" didn't stick until around 1924 (originally it described young men enjoying their "roaring twenties" before settling down). But even at the time, Americans thought they were entering a "jazz age." "The age of jazz" spread "like flu," "a musical virus" transmitted across the country from Kansas ("this wild age of jazz") to Missouri ("this age of jazz and abominations") to Alabama ("we are living in the age of jazz"). A Nebraska editorial was comforted "in this age of jazz" by a local old-fashioned spelling bee, suggesting the "younger generation is not going to the dogs" after all. A minister in Philadelphia took up the lament: Americans inhabited "a jazz age," "an age where everything goes," he added, "with jazz in the atmosphere and even the moral structure jazzing." Conservative white America found jazz deeply threatening, not least for its racially coded implications of wildness, violence, permissiveness: "jungle jazz," they called it. In Fitzgerald's recollection, jazz—possibly cognate to "jism," though no one knows for sure—meant sex first, even before it meant music.[2]

Knowing that Fitzgerald ascribed this "state of nervous stimulation" to World War I, we yet miss his point: America's nervous energy was "unexpended" by the war (his generation, he wrote, "saw death ahead, and were reprieved"), the nation left struggling to adjust. Meanwhile, the influenza pandemic had just finished killing nearly 700,000 Americans, only subsiding in the autumn of 1919. Newspapers reported statistics through the first months of 1920: "27,000 New Cases of Influenza in 23 States in Week," a nervous headline announced. After three waves of epidemic, everyone was on the lookout for signs of a fourth. At the same time, Congress passed both the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments, which would come into law in 1920 and throw switches in the nation's tracks in different political directions, one toward nativist authoritarianism (Prohibition), the other toward liberal pluralism (women's suffrage).

Nor had the boom yet begun: at the start of 1920 the US entered a sharp deflationary recession lasting eighteen months. In 1919 labor and racial unrest, as well as political uncertainty, had provoked riots and the so-called Red Summer, which led to a draconian crackdown ending in the Palmer Raids of January 1920, during which at least three thousand people were arrested, almost all of whom were immigrants, accused of being leftists. Articles with headlines such as "Raids Drive 'Reds' to Cover" on the front pages of Hearst's papers reported that hundreds of "aliens" and "radicals" were being summarily deported, beneath a masthead reading "America First!" That slogan had dominated the presidential campaign of 1916, helped persuade America to vote against joining the League of Nations, and remained so popular that Warren G. Harding rode it to the White House in November 1920.

The groups who voted for "America first" largely overlapped with those who favored Prohibition: nativist white Protestant Americans sought to criminalize customs they regarded as suspiciously foreign, urban, and decadent, associating alcohol particularly with new Irish, Italian, and German immigrants. The Harlem Renaissance was about to bloom—but the Ku Klux Klan was mustering, ready to burn black America to the ground. America's destiny was no longer manifest, provoking widespread anxiety about what shape it would take. Jazz gave a word to all these jitters.

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[1] Aptly enough the etymology and evolution of "jazz" are also semantically unstable. Although many claim its earliest print uses are from 1912–1913, and that its first recorded uses did not refer to music, there are at least two earlier references to jazz as music. In 1900 an Alabama paper reported on failed efforts to start "a jazz section" with "jazz palaces" in Glasgow ("Attempts to Jazz Glasgow Have Failed," *Anniston Star*, January 1, 1900), while a 1909 article refers to the "jazz" and "pep" of the banjo ("Banjuke Is the Latest," *Piedmont News*, July 12, 1909).

[2] "The word jazz in its progress toward respectability has meant first sex, then dancing, then music," Fitzgerald wrote in "Echoes of the Jazz Age."

Just as the idea of an "age of jazz" was jazzing its way around the country, a twenty-four-year-old writer of tremendous ambition was hitting his stride. For most of 1919 Fitzgerald had struggled to sell any stories—but as the decade turned, so did his fortunes. *The Saturday Evening Post*, the nation's most popular magazine, began buying his fiction, as did *The Smart Set*, the literary periodical edited by H.L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, the era's most influential tastemakers. Between the autumn of 1919 and the summer of 1920, Fitzgerald published sixteen stories in nationally prominent outlets, three of which were snapped up by Hollywood and turned into silent "picturizations" released within the year; most of them satirized modern America. One of his first, "Dalyrimple Goes Wrong," published in February 1920, lampoons the American success story with the tale of a house burglar who becomes a state senator. Like Jay Gatsby after him, Dalyrimple is a veteran who turns to crime when denied opportunity in postwar America. Most of Fitzgerald's young protagonists scoffed at conventional morality; the heroine of "Benediction," also published that February, contemplates adultery and discusses contraception with her brother, a monk, telling him that "everybody talks about everything now." These were audacious tales, provocatively asking if America was ready to jazz.

That question was answered with the publication of Fitzgerald's first novel in March 1920. For his contemporaries, it was *This Side of Paradise*, not *The Great Gatsby*, that was the quintessential jazzing novel, ragged and spontaneous, youthful and percussive, iconoclastic, chaotic, vexatious. At once a portrait of the artist and a cultural testament, it struck a chord with that younger generation who may or may not have been going to the dogs but were definitely going to jazz. Bearing witness to social revolution, defiantly breaking taboos, the book spoke slang in a voice its young readers instantly recognized. Aesthetically it was subversive, mixing genres and styles, including plays and verse, shifting giddily from social comedy to metaphysical tragedy, scattered with facetious editorial headlines ("Still Alcoholic," "The Little Man Gets His").

To its first readers the novel seemed experimentally modernist, as discordant as Stravinsky, as fragmented as Picasso, "running over with youth and jazz," "astonishing and refreshing," a work of "unmistakable and truly remarkable promise" that "bears the impress... of genius." So tremendous was the word-of-mouth publicity that this first novel by an unknown writer went through three editions in three weeks; after a visit to the US, the Prince of Wales reportedly recommended it to his friends. By 1921, it had gone through twelve editions, and Scott Fitzgerald had become, he said somewhat dazedly, "a sort of oracle" for jazz-age America.[3]

The novel's protagonist, Amory Blaine, an ironized alter ego, despises the hypocrisy of his parents' generation; swinging between cynicism and idealism, seeking an ambition worthy of his indefinite aspirations, he articulates the choice Gatsby would later make: "If one can't be a great artist or a great soldier, the next best thing is to be a great criminal." Amory and his friends experiment with sex, deride Prohibition, and embrace radical ideas like psychoanalysis, atheism, and socialism. Rejecting a society defined by crass materialism and rampant capitalism, Amory declares socialism "the only panacea I know. I'm restless. My whole generation is restless."

In fact, Amory is a textbook champagne socialist, like Fitzgerald himself, whose sympathies with Marxism were qualified at best, though he always identified with "the smoldering hatred of a peasant" against the rich. Fitzgerald saw what money could do but never confused it with meaning. "Money isn't the only stimulus that brings out the best that's in a man, even in America," Amory insists. His half-hearted espousal of socialism is, as Edmund Wilson wrote, a "gesture of indefinite revolt" against "outworn systems." The novel ends with lines that became instantly famous, its hero surveying "a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken." Fitzgerald had found his subject: the moral confusions of modern America.

It was not *This Side of Paradise* that brought Fitzgerald's "first big mail," however; that came, he said, when he received "hundreds and hundreds of letters on a story about a girl who bobbed her hair." Though the dancer Irene Castle helped popularize short hair, and its appeal spread as women joined the war effort, when "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" appeared in May 1920, bobbed hair was still a renegade choice in small-town America. The story satirically reverses the scene in *Little Women* when Jo sacrifices her "one beauty" by nobly cutting her hair to help pay for her mother's journey to rescue their sick father. Fitzgerald's modern girls flatly reject such patriarchal ideals of Victorian filial piety. "Oh, please don't quote 'Little Women'!" popular Marjorie snaps at her old-fashioned cousin Bernice. "That's out of style.... What modern girl could live like those inane females?" Whereas a central lesson Alcott's little women must learn is to suppress their rage, "Bernice" is about cutting female anger loose. Marjorie and Bernice are not devoted sisters but rivals; when Bernice's popularity threatens to eclipse Marjorie's, she forces Bernice to go through with a professed intention to bob her hair, calling her bluff. Publicly shamed, Bernice takes her revenge, stealthily cutting off Marjorie's long blond locks while she sleeps, before running away, wildly laughing, into the night.

"Bernice Bobs Her Hair" has been dismissed as a story about petty female narcissism, but there is courage in Bernice's decision to stand up to public challenge. Marjorie's dare is a thrown gauntlet, and Bernice meets "the test supreme of her sportsmanship." Fitzgerald shows us the birth of the flapper: self-conscious, often vain, but a good sport and woman of her word. This is Jane Austen with knives—or scissors—out, a comedy of manners that turns into a duel. Not for nothing does Fitzgerald write that Bernice has "scalped" Marjorie at the story's end, developing an earlier hint that Bernice might have Native American blood. Today that detail discomfits readers, but for Fitzgerald's generation it was a standard image of savagery being satirically applied to a spoiled debutante. His point was that Bernice has found it in her to be fierce, and to be free.

3.

While awaiting the publication of *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald finished "quite a marvellous after-the-war story," probably salvaged from an abandoned second novel. It was long, disjointed, rather grim; none of the commercial slicks would take it, but *The Smart Set* published it in July 1920. "May Day," considered by many scholars Fitzgerald's first masterpiece, was based, he said, on "three events" from the spring of 1919 that "made a great impression" on him. "In life they were unrelated," he explained when he revised the story in 1922, "except by the general hysteria of that spring which inaugurated the Age of Jazz," but in Fitzgerald's imagination they fused into one story. For him, it was the 1919 May Day riots that "inaugurated" the Jazz Age: not parties or music, bathtub gin or a booming stock market, but the violence of class conflict.

In early 1919 Fitzgerald was living in New York, broke and near despair, fearing professional failure, while his rich college friends gathered for lavish cotillions at Delmonico's, the exclusive restaurant of the Gilded Age elite, or at "lush and liquid garden parties." Even as he "tippled with Princetonians in the Biltmore Bar," Fitzgerald later recalled, "I was haunted always by my other life," "my shabby suits, my poverty." One Saturday that spring, Fitzgerald became extremely drunk with a wealthy friend while attending a dance at Delmonico's. They hung signs from the cloakroom around their necks, introducing each other as Mr. In and Mr. Out, before going to Child's all-night restaurant on 59th Street, where Fitzgerald tried to explain that Columbus Circle doesn't really curve, but only seemed to because he was drunk. They finished with breakfast at the Biltmore, smashing champagne bottles on Sunday morning in front of startled churchgoers.

Even as Fitzgerald enjoyed such silly debauchery, senseless violence and conflicts over inequality and "Americanism" filled the news. At the end of April, parades of returning soldiers marched up Fifth Avenue past grandstands and cheers from gathered crowds; a bartender at Delmonico's who had been watching from one of the restaurant's upstairs windows fell and fractured his skull, making national front-page news. On May 1, in cities across America, returning veterans attacked socialist groups celebrating the Bolshevik revolution; in New York, homemade bombs were discovered addressed to politicians, while thousands of servicemen roamed the streets in search of "reds" and raided meeting places, including the offices of a socialist daily, *The Call*, where a man jumped twenty-five feet from a window to escape the mob. A week later, James Reese Europe, the most famous jazz musician in America, was stabbed to death by his own drummer in a backstage dispute. A passionate advocate of African-Americans playing their own music, Europe was the first person to bring syncopated rhythms to Carnegie Hall, in 1912, before arranging the "Castle Walk," which made the foxtrot a national mania. Fitzgerald saw Irene Castle and her husband, Vernon, perform it in 1913, and probably danced to Europe's Society Orchestra at Delmonico's.

"May Day" fuses all these tumultuous events into a jazz-age vanity fair, as a small cast of characters orbit around a dance at Delmonico's, their toing and froing symbolizing the frenetic motion of postwar America, the city bringing the powerful and the powerless into dangerous proximity. It begins in mock-heroic fashion, with parades of returning soldiers marching up the "chief highway" of "the great city of the conquering people," where merchants flock in search of the "prosperity impending hymned by the scribes," and ends with a young artist shooting himself. In the 1920 magazine version, the suicide is implied when the owner of a store sells a gun because "business is bad enough, God knows!," closing the story on the failing economy with which it opens.

"May Day" depicts a callous society in which the children of the elite flaunt their wealth at a restaurant a few blocks north of J.P. Morgan's mansion, while ragged soldiers roam the streets looking for a drink. It is a tale of privilege and dispossession, entitled aristocrats and their careless harm—the motifs of *Gatsby* in far more explicit terms. None of the characters are pleasant and none end well: rich and poor, artist and philistine, capitalist and socialist, serviceman and pacifist, all crash into one another in the streets of urban America. The story is broken into jagged sections, its tonal dissonances chiming with the "incongruous" society it depicts, a montage of fear and frenzy in accelerated ragtime.

At Delmonico's, rich young men flit "like dignified black moths" among perfumed debutantes; an aspiring artist, destroying himself with drink and a sordid affair, hopes his rich friends will rescue him; two soldiers sneak in off the street, trying to cadge some liquor. Outside, mobs have been gathering all day, and "a gesticulating little Jew" has been attacked for demanding, "What have you got outa the war? Look arounja, look arounja! Are you rich?... Who got anything out of it except J. P. Morgan an' John D. Rockefeller?"

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[3] *Dear Scott/Dear Max: The Fitzgerald–Perkins Correspondence*, edited by John Kuehl and Jackson R. Bryer (Scribner's, 1971, 2016), p. 114.

Fitzgerald was not insulated from the electric shocks of jazz-age life; that he was also sometimes jolted by them is clear in this malicious contemporary stereotype of the socialist Jew. Similarly, his two soldiers are "degenerate" examples of the underclass, "ugly, ill-nourished, devoid of all except the very lowest form of intelligence." The literary naturalism Fitzgerald employs in "May Day," much applauded at the time, converged with popular eugenicist ideas of biological determinism, as endorsed in books like T. Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color*, published a month after Fitzgerald finished "May Day" and thinly disguised as the book Tom Buchanan recommends at the start of *Gatsby*.

The climax comes when a debutante leaves Delmonico's to visit her brother at the nearby offices of the *Trumpet*, a "radical weekly." She articulates Fitzgerald's subject for him, remarking, "It seems sort of—of incongruous doesn't it?—me being at a party like that, and you over here working for a thing that'll make that sort of party impossible ever any more, if your ideas work." But in this tale, socialism offers no panacea; her brother is "fatuously" trying "to pour the latest cures for incurable evils" into the paper's columns. During her visit, a mob of soldiers, including the two from Delmonico's, breaks into the *Trumpet*'s office; one is pushed out the window and falls thirty-five feet to "split his skull like a cracked cocoa-nut."

Back at Delmonico's, two rich young Yale men, spectacularly drunk, have hung cloakroom signs round their necks and are riding the elevator as "Mr. In" and "Mr. Out," an image combining social hierarchies with the theme of inclusion and exclusion. "Bound skyward," they demand ever greater heights in a parody of mindless ambition and the arrogance of wealth:

> "Any floor," said Mr. In.
> "Top floor," said Mr. Out.
> "This is the top floor," said the elevator man.
> "Have another floor put on," said Mr. Out.
> "Higher," said Mr. In.
> "Heaven," said Mr. Out.

Up they go, as Jay Gatsby would climb in search of incomparable wonder, while Americans embarked on a craze for sitting on flagpoles that ended when everything toppled in 1929. The mood of "May Day" is drunken hallucination, but it foresees the senseless escalation to come, a nation riding ever higher but getting nowhere.

After the dance, Fitzgerald sends most of his characters to Child's restaurant, where his own drunken memory provided a metaphor for national disenchantment:

> Dawn had come up in Columbus Circle, magical, breathless dawn, silhouetting the great statue of the immortal Christopher, and mingling in a curious and uncanny manner with the fading yellow electric light inside.

Five years before *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald could already see the dimming hopes of the colonial new world, idealistic dawns fusing with artificial light, promise dissolving into the "uncanny" glare of modern America.

"The Jazz Age is over," Fitzgerald wrote to his editor, Max Perkins, in 1931. "I claim credit for naming it," he added: "it extended from the suppression of the riots on May Day 1919 to the crash of the Stock Market in 1929—almost exactly one decade." Perkins agreed, encouraging Fitzgerald to expand the observation, which led to his writing "Echoes of the Jazz Age." Enormous attention has been paid to the end of the era, far less to its beginning: it was after "the police rode down the demobilized country boys gaping at the orators in Madison Square," Fitzgerald recalled, that Americans began to think that if "business men had this effect on the government, then maybe we had gone to war for J. P. Morgan's loans after all." It all began, for him, with violence over financial imperialism, politics and inequality, outrage that the rich had profiteered from the annihilation of the poor.

"May Day," like *Gatsby*, portrays a sick society. Even *Gatsby*'s first readers, however, mistook the spiritual malaise Fitzgerald was diagnosing for another ailment. "Unhappily, the picture in 'The Great Gatsby' is not overdrawn," observed one reviewer. "The jazz virus is with us . . . [in] what we are pleased to call modern civilization." But *Gatsby* shows an America suffering less from viral modernity than from a moral cancer that is metastasizing—and which it keeps misdiagnosing. Nostalgia, derived from a Greek term meaning "homesickness," was long considered a medical form of insanity, one that could prove fatal. That was the meaning Fitzgerald grew up with, but by 1920 nostalgia had begun to convey sentimental yearning for a lost time. Fitzgerald became America's poet laureate of nostalgia because he understood its perils as well as its allure: nostalgia wants to falsify the past, whereas history tries to clarify it. Gatsby, the emblematic American, is destroyed by nostalgia, his dreams of reclaiming paradise shattered by the "hard malice" of Tom Buchanan's plutocratic power. Gatsby's incurable faith in the false promise of renewal—"Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can!"—is America's. Like Gatsby, we want to recover some idea of ourselves that we've lost, to return to the past and find there, intact, our own innocence. Gatsby's "extraordinary gift for hope" is our own—and ensures we keep willfully forgetting that his great aspirations ended dead in the water.

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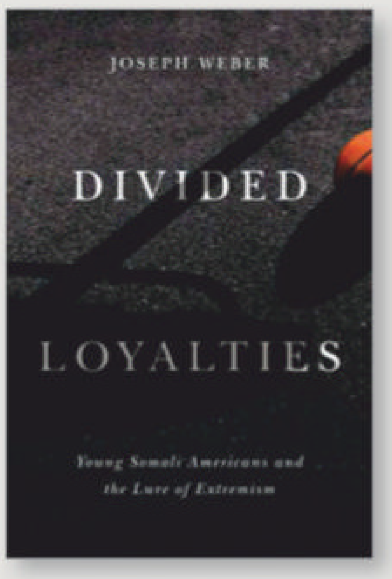

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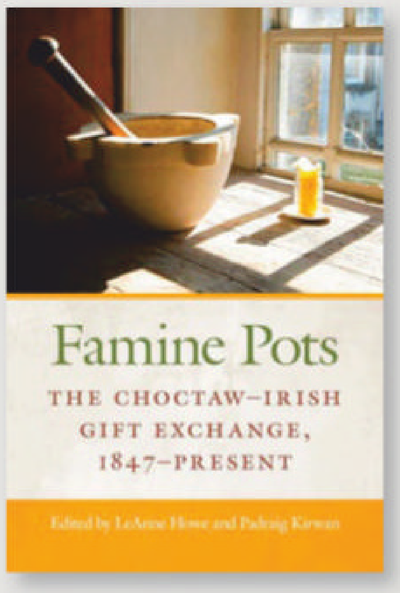

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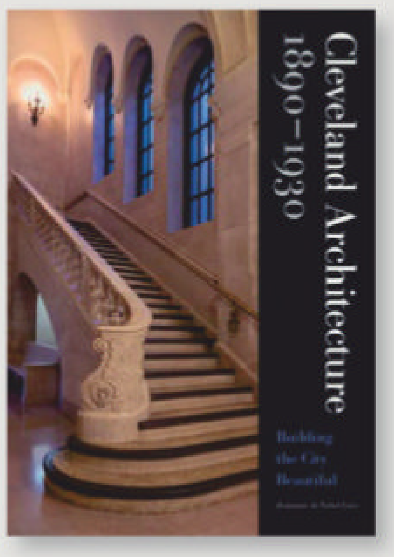

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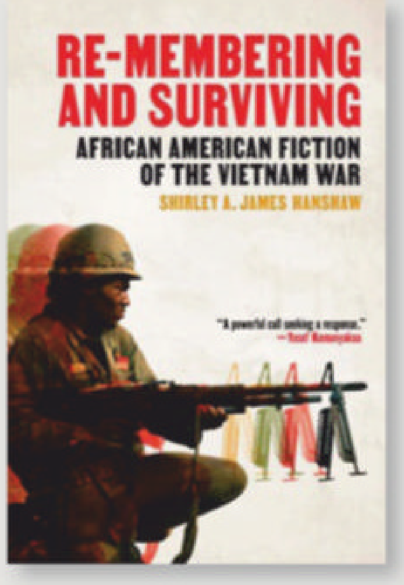

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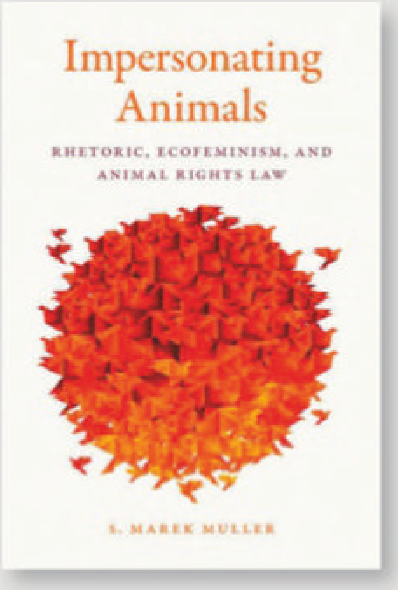

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Deportation Nation

Julia Preston

The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants
by Adam Goodman.
Princeton University Press,
322 pp., $29.95

The Battle to Stay in America: Immigration's Hidden Front Line
by Michael Kagan.
University of Nevada Press,
200 pp., $27.95

Rogelio V. Solis/AP Images

Workers from a Koch Foods plant being taken away by ICE agents during a raid, Morton, Mississippi, August 7, 2019

The United States is in an age of mass deportation. This may not be surprising, given how consistently President Trump has denigrated, demonized, and threatened immigrants. His administration has waged an assault on the entire immigration system, shutting down access to asylum, pressuring the immigration courts to churn out removal orders, and adopting rules that narrowed the avenues to legal immigration and crippled US Citizenship and Immigration Services, which administers it. According to the most recent official figures, from the beginning of Trump's term through September 2019 his administration carried out more than 584,000 formal deportations. As of last October, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was monitoring more than 3.2 million cases of immigrants who were in active deportation proceedings.

Yet despite Trump's repeated warnings that he planned to expel more than one million unauthorized immigrants, he has not reached the numbers achieved by President Obama, whose administration expelled over three million people and holds the record for formal deportations in a year—more than 432,000 in 2013. Trump has remained preoccupied with the Mexican border and constructing his wall. He has also been increasing ICE's funding and staff, which now numbers more than 20,000. In doing so, he has built on a steady expansion of immigration enforcement initiated two decades ago, in response to the September 11 attacks.

The deportation system held sway over immigrant communities long before Trump became president, but under his direction it has become even more far-reaching, arbitrary, and cruel. Immigrants have regularly been arrested at home and work, sometimes as "collateral" when ICE has come looking for someone else. They've been handed off to ICE after being arrested by local police, often for minor offenses. They've been picked up from county jails and courthouses and detained at highway checkpoints. Some were abruptly deported after appearing at ICE offices for routine check-ins. At times these enforcement actions made news, as when ICE swept into chicken-processing plants in Mississippi on August 7, 2019, in a blitz that yielded 680 arrests. But in general, they have attracted little attention.

Because of orders Trump issued early in his administration that made any immigrant without legal status vulnerable to deportation, families have been increasingly separated. The number of undocumented immigrants in the United States has risen and fallen, but since 2004 it has remained at more than 10 million. Many are settled in American communities and have mixed-status families, with some members who are undocumented, others who may have some kind of legal immigration papers, and others—mostly children—who are American citizens. When the head of a household is deported, these families are shattered and can plunge into poverty. The abrupt banishing of a parent leaves children hurt, disoriented, and angry. Undocumented family members who remain are forced into an existence framed in fear. Yet the country has not tended to view deportation as a punitive measure, like incarceration, even though its effects on communities can be no less disastrous.

In his superbly researched and briskly narrated *The Deportation Machine*, Adam Goodman, an assistant professor of history and Latin American and Latino studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, comprehensively recasts the way we think about expulsions from the US and their effects. Although formal deportations—those ordered by an immigration court or other federal authority—have become a dominant means of enforcement only since the 1990s, Goodman shows that coerced departures by various means have been a powerful form of immigration control, exercised by federal and sometimes local authorities, since at least the late nineteenth century.

Digging into archives of the immigration bureaucracy, including some that he was the first scholar to locate and explore, Goodman estimates that nearly 57 million people have been deported since the 1880s, far more than the number of immigrants who were given legal papers allowing them to stay. For long periods border and interior enforcement were haphazard and underfunded, and so authorities relied on recurrent mass purges and scare tactics to frighten immigrants into agreeing to depart, or into packing up and leaving on their own. "Officials have long used everyday policing, immigration raids, and mass expulsion drives to remove unauthorized immigrants from the country," Goodman writes, "but they have also relied on rumors and publicity blitzes surrounding these initiatives to spur self-deportation."

Many immigrant nationalities have been spurned and persecuted in upsurges of xenophobia since the early 1900s, but the impact of deportations has fallen overwhelmingly on Mexicans. For more than a century, Goodman writes, "repeated apprehensions, detentions, and deportations have affected Mexicans' material and psychological well-being, as has living in the United States under the constant threat of forcible separation from one's family." Goodman also dispels any notion that deportation is merely a civil administrative procedure, though it is codified that way in immigration law. He shows that authorities have long designed removals to be so painful that migrants would be deterred from trying again to enter the country illegally. "Frequently," he writes, "punishment became the point."

Goodman traces the origins of the deportation system to the hostility toward Chinese immigrants that arose in the American West after economic boom-and-bust cycles in the nineteenth century. A newspaper in 1854 editorialized that Chinese immigrants were "uncivilized, unclean and filthy beyond all conception," and likely to carry contagions. In the Northwest, white supremacists who were allied with labor organizations, some taking inspiration from the Ku Klux Klan, hounded Chinese immigrants from dozens of communities, torching their homes and adorning their streets with gallows.

Starting in the 1880s, Congress passed laws to exclude Chinese laborers and to authorize deportations of any immigrants who were "likely to become public charges" or carry diseases. In 1893 a momentous Supreme Court decision in the case of a Chinese immigrant set the legal foundations for deportation, determining that the United States' right to expel foreigners was "absolute and unqualified" and mostly not subject to judicial review. The Court also concluded that deportation was not a punishment but merely "a method of enforcing the return" of a foreigner to a home country.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, as the US fought in World War I and then was devastated by the Great Depression, the government became more concerned with its southern border, and Mexicans became the primary targets. A century-long cycle of migration was set in motion as Mexicans came north to fill farm labor shortages and escape the violence of the Mexican Revolution.

In 1929 a white supremacist senator, Coleman Livingston Blease of South Carolina, persuaded Congress to make it a federal crime to cross the border without authorization (now a misdemeanor on the first offense, a felony upon reentry). But the law was left mostly unenforced until a border crackdown initiated by President George W. Bush to quell an outcry from conservative activists, and then it was applied only selectively. Instead, Mexicans faced constant pressure to get out: vilified in the press as lawbreaking aliens and subjected to raids by authorities and attacks by nativist "alien-hunting" groups with names like America for Americans. "The farmer rids his barn of rats, his hen-house of weasels," argued an editorial in a San Antonio newspaper in 1930. As many as half a million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were expelled from the country in the decade after 1929.

Using records and correspondence from the immigration service, Goodman looks inside Operation Wetback, the expulsion campaign against undocumented Mexicans in 1954 whose name indicates the ease with which anti-Mexican slurs were used. It came during a period when the US offered a designated route to temporary legal status for Mexican laborers through the Bracero Program, which from 1942 to 1964 issued more than 4.6 million contracts to more than 400,000 men, who came mainly as seasonal farmworkers. Demand for Mexican labor far outstripped the program, however, and unauthorized immigration soared. President Eisenhower tapped a retired general, Joseph M. Swing, to be commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and to command Operation Wetback like a military mission—“to stamp out the wetback practice and all its attendant evils,” as Swing declared.

It began with noisy publicity campaigns to persuade Americans that unauthorized Mexicans “propagated disease, committed crimes, drained the tax base, and degraded the labor standards and living conditions” of American workers, Goodman writes. Hundreds of Border Patrol agents in mobile task forces fanned out through cities and towns far from the border, in California, Texas, and Illinois. Charging through agricultural fields and into factories, grabbing people in parks and on their front stoops, agents apprehended more than 44,000 Mexicans in California in one month alone. The immigrants were bussed to Arizona and deported from there, a detour designed to raise the time and costs of return. After three months Swing said the purge was making “splendid headway,” having “netted over 140,000 wetbacks.” Once it ended, he declared, “The so-called ‘wetback’ problem no longer exists.... The border has been secured.”

The vast majority of the more than one million deportations in 1954, in which Mexicans were rounded up, penned, and shipped like livestock over the border, were registered in official records as “voluntary departures.” Operation Wetback was only a high point of what Goodman calls “mass deportation on the cheap,” policies that avoided time-consuming and costly legal proceedings, in which detainees might have a chance of arguing their case, in favor of harassment and fear propagation that drove them to agree to pay their own way out, and convinced many immigrants to leave before they were arrested. Swing’s announcement of the success of his operation proved to be a major misjudgment, and unauthorized crossings continued, but the fear-based regime loomed over Mexican communities into the final decades of the century.

In some of his most vivid passages, Goodman recounts the voyages of the “hell ships,” Mexican cargo ships hired by the immigration service in the 1950s to transport tens of thousands of deportees from south Texas to Veracruz in southern Mexico, an early episode of private profiteering in immigration. The voyages were planned with conditions so indelibly subhuman that deportees would never again want to return to the United States. They were crammed in “very filthy and foul-smelling” holds, retching with seasickness, in suffocating heat by day and numbing cold at night.

A navy captain sent to inspect the ships insisted that these deficiencies didn’t matter, because Mexicans were used to “living in general not much better than animals.” Finally, in August 1956, an uprising erupted among the deportees on one ship, forcing it to reroute to the port of Tampico, where several dozen hurled themselves overboard to escape. The ship transfers came to an end, but Goodman concludes that “enduring state-sanctioned violence and trauma was—and continues to be—a central element of the immigrant experience.”

Immigrants and their allies at times succeeded in resisting the deportation regime. In May 1978, during a period of intense activism by Latino groups in California on immigration issues, the INS raided the Sbicca shoe factory near Los Angeles, detaining 119 employees and hustling most of them onto buses that headed straight to the border. Goodman introduces us to several young attorneys who rushed in to try to stop the deportations. Among them was Peter Schey, who had grown up in South Africa and came to the United States when his father, a critic of the apartheid regime, had to flee. Only five years out of law school, Schey went to federal court armed with ambitious, untested legal arguments and convinced a judge to issue a restraining order on some deportations. Fourteen years later, the case was finally settled. Schey and his team won agreement that the INS would inform detainees of basic rights, allow them to consult lawyers, and provide a list of available legal services. In the end, thirty-one immigrants were spared deportation. It was an early example of the tenacious work that has been required to win even minimal rights for immigrants in the deportation system.[1]

Goodman also examines a law Congress passed in 1996 at the urging of President Clinton, who was seeking to prove his law-and-order credentials as he campaigned for reelection. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, known as IIRIRA—a name that stirs loathing among immigration lawyers but is not widely known beyond them—has “done more to reshape the deportation machine than any law over the last half-century,” Goodman writes. The statute added to the list of offenses that could lead to deportation, enhanced the authorities’ powers to deport, diminished immigrants’ due process rights, imposed mandatory detention in many cases, and made most deportations an irrevocable ten-year sentence to banishment. Combined with the hardening of border security that began in those years, IIRIRA marked a systemic shift toward formal deportations, which left a record in an immigrant’s file, exposing those who came back again to felony prosecution and up to two years in prison. Over the years, the law’s sanctions have resulted in the quiet dismemberment of countless families, including those of Americans who married undocumented immigrants, expecting that their citizenship gave them the right to obtain legal residency for a spouse, regardless of his or her status. Instead, they saw the government expel the person they loved.

As his title announces, Goodman presents the US deportation regime as a machine. This allows him to reveal with new precision the vast dimension and oppressive power of an unseen system. In practice, however, the machine has not been nearly as well oiled and effective as the image suggests. Immigration enforcement has frequently been improvised in response to crises, and riddled with inconsistencies and unintended consequences, as Americans lurched between embracing immigrants and shunning them. Time and again, when employers needed labor, immigration agents were encouraged to go easy. In addition, Goodman fails to grapple with the difficult question of who does merit deportation. It has become an unavoidable issue, since Trump has convinced a lot of Americans that the US is overrun with foreign criminals.

DREAM

Half in, half out of my dream:
    deer wander in a bright auditorium.
They are serene until they see me,
    when they bolt and scatter, looking for cover.

I stand frozen on the half-court line.
    If I move, the deer go berserk.
A doe just split her head open
    when she rammed the cinderblock wall;

a fawn pulls all her fur apart, and gags
    on mouthfuls of hide she can’t spit.
I see the hunger in their stenciled ribs,
    the furniture inside their skin.

—And then I’m spared, alone in bed.
    I’m forty-six, a trespasser
in my dream gym. The deer are children.
    I’m the maypole they dance around.

—Dan Chiasson

The destructive impact of this enforcement regime on day-to-day life in immigrant communities is described with refreshing clarity and heart by Michael Kagan in *The Battle to Stay in America.* Kagan, a law professor at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, tells stories of his neighbors and of clients at the university law clinic he runs. He provides an unusually accessible primer on immigration law and a valuable guide to the ways it currently works to perpetuate an excluded immigrant underclass with diminished rights.

In Nevada, one of every thirteen residents is an undocumented immigrant; one of every seven schoolchildren has an undocumented parent. Kagan goes to the homes of mixed-status families, like that of Olivero and Manuela, Mexican parents who have lived in Las Vegas since 2002, working their way up to high-ranking jobs in the kitchens of swanky restaurants on the Strip. One of their children has DACA, a temporary form of legal protection, and two others, born in Nevada, are US citizens. Kagan does not dismiss the fact that the couple broke the law when they crossed the border illegally. But he says the system should offer a proportional punishment. Under Nevada law, he notes, some traffic violations are misdemeanor offenses approximately equivalent to the crime of improper entry, but they are punished with fines and suspensions, and perhaps short jail time, not years of separation from family. Although Trump administration officials insist that immigrants have to come “the right way,” Kagan explains that there are no legal visas reasonably available for Mexicans who come to the US to work hard in low-wage jobs and rejoin family. Nor does current law offer Olivero and Manuela, neither of whom has ever been arrested, a way to atone and move past their original violation. “This family embodies so many values that we Americans say we hold dear,” Kagan writes. “And yet, the only thing the law offers them is deportation.”

Kagan is candid about the demoralization that lawyers have experienced under Trump as they fail again and again to win asylum for their clients in immigration courts, especially for those from Central America. Asylum law obliges attorneys to prompt migrants to relive unspeakable violence and degradation—rape, gang torture, beatings by a family member—in order to present their story to a judge. Yet a case can depend entirely on the luck of the draw; in Las Vegas one judge granted asylum to only fourteen people in 452 cases over five years. Revisions to the law under Trump have made the odds much steeper. Kagan recalls having to prepare an appeal in the case of a Salvadoran girl who had barely escaped a gang rape. The judge was persuaded that the teenager was in danger but ordered her deported anyway, determining that her rape would not have been “for one of the legally relevant reasons.” Kagan admits feeling nausea informing clients of these denials.

Immigration law also offers nothing for Fernando Gonzalez, a Guatemalan handyman who failed to pay a fine for a broken brake light on his truck and was arrested in 2018 by Las Vegas police, then turned over to ICE as a result of a cooperation agreement between the two agencies. After fourteen years in the US, the married father of two American children was awaiting the outcome of his deportation case without much hope. While community leaders were preparing defensive tactics to respond to splashy ICE raids, Kagan realized that these cooperative law enforcement partnerships were leading to far more deportations. What ICE usually did was "just persuade local police departments to hand local residents over to be deported, quietly, behind closed doors, and often in the dead of night." Emergency deportation cases overwhelmed his law clinic.

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[1] For an expert and eminently readable account of an even more epic case led by Peter Schey, see Philip G. Schrag, *Baby Jails: The Fight to End the Incarceration of Refugee Children in America* (University of California Press, 2020). It tells the story of the Flores case, brought to improve the conditions of detention for migrant children. The lawsuit was first filed in 1985 and the settlement is still in force—and Schey is still litigating it—today.

Kagan joined a group of young lawyers, some just out of law school, and a growing number of activists and recently elected state lawmakers to resist the program of cooperation with ICE. After false starts, their pressure convinced the sheriff of Clark County to suspend it.

Yet these victories hardly mitigate Kagan's sense that he is failing: "On most days I read my email and I know: we're losing." (Indeed, at times he burdens his narrative with too many confessions about his job stress and his parenting travails with daughters adopted from Africa.) Looking at his immigrant neighbors, he sees "a community under siege," as workers who are essential to Las Vegas's high-rolling lifestyle are treated as "expendable, optional, invisible." Kagan says that lawyers who practice in this field know that "the machinery of cruelty was built into immigration law more than a century ago and was never taken out." The Trump administration has "removed the safety valves . . . and as a result the machine can increasingly only do one thing. It removes people."

These books confirm that the language and practice of xenophobia in American politics have been remarkably consistent. In the 1920s aliens were expelled on the grounds that they spread disease, brought crime, and took jobs from Americans. A century later, Trump used the same claims and seized on the 1929 statute that criminalized border-crossing to bring record numbers of federal immigration prosecutions, creating new legions of immigrant convicts.

As the coronavirus spread this year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued an order in March suspending entry to the US of migrants crossing by land from Mexico and Canada, citing "a serious danger" of introducing the disease, even though at that point transmission was moving from the United States to Mexico. The Department of Homeland Security has used that order to carry out a new form of summary expulsion, sending more than 109,000 border-crossers, likely including many asylum-seekers, back to Mexico with no proceedings or official record, often in less than twenty-four hours. Among them were at least 570 unaccompanied children, some as young as ten years old, who were held in hotels before they were expelled to avoid placing them in legally mandated shelters. The president also cited the pandemic to suspend most legal immigration, denying entry to legal residents and temporary workers. His proclamation conflated several evils he wants to associate with immigrants, calling them "Aliens Who Present a Risk to the US Labor Market Following the Coronavirus Outbreak."

During this year's anti–police brutality protests following the killing of George Floyd, signs calling for defunding or abolishing ICE have appeared only sporadically. But under Trump, many immigrants live in fear of any encounter with police, at risk of being singled out based on their appearance for a stop that could lead to the catastrophe of deportation, and always worried that ICE will come looking for them. Undocumented parents have their own version of "the conversation" they must have with their teenage children: what to do if they leave for work and do not come home. Deportations of immigrants with no serious criminal record have increased year after year.

National Archives and Records Administration

Mexican deportees on the SS Mercurio, *August 1956*

More than six million American children live in households with at least one undocumented family member, as I reported in a recent article for the Marshall Project and *The Guardian* based on data from the Center for Migration Studies.[2] Years after a parent or spouse was deported, the families I met in northeast Ohio were still reeling. American teenagers struggled to understand why a caring parent had been forced to leave them. Their schoolwork declined, and two girls in one family tried to kill themselves. American spouses endured anguish and bitter frustration as they tried to sustain families on their own. It was hard to identify anyone who benefited from these removals.

In a speech on August 18 in Yuma, Arizona, Trump framed his second-term policies in the same alarmist terms, almost to the letter, that he used in announcing his candidacy five years ago. "We have people coming into this country, some great people, some really bad people, too. I mean murderers, and I mean rapists," he said. If Trump is reelected, the enforcement regime will be further strengthened, deportations will increase, and he most likely will make permanent cuts to legal immigration, abandoning, perhaps definitively, the United States' identity as a nation that welcomes immigrants.

If Joe Biden wins the White House, he has said he will quickly set new guidelines for ICE, halt most criminal prosecutions of border-crossers, restore protections for immigrants brought to the US as children, rebuild the wrecked asylum system, and reopen the gates to legal immigrants and refugees. But to overcome the greatest failing of the system, Biden will have to undertake with Congress what amounts to an act of emancipation, to bring millions of immigrants who have lived good lives in this country out of illegality. Biden was slow to recognize the legacy he carried of deportations under Obama. He said in February that the high numbers were "a big mistake," and since then his position has continued to evolve. He made pledges to send a bill to Congress on "day one" with a "roadmap to citizenship" for 11 million undocumented immigrants, and at one point he supported a hundred-day moratorium on deportations.

With recession levels of unemployment and the rise of street violence around some protests against police, Biden has recently been a bit more cautious. His latest plan says he will "commit significant political capital" and "immediately begin working with Congress" on the broad roadmap, which includes a fast track to citizenship for farmworkers and for immigrants who came as children. He proposes to make work-based visas more readily available and to create a program to allow cities and counties to petition for legal immigrant workers, to reduce incentives for unauthorized immigration. Biden will face pressure to reverse some of Trump's most unjust deportations, like those of US military veterans who were denied citizenship, had their green cards canceled, and were expelled, often for nonviolent crimes committed after their service. It is hard to see how he can accomplish any of this without Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. But if he achieves just the essential parts, it will bring some peace to immigrant communities that have lived under the threat of deportation for generations. □

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[2] "The True Costs of Deportation," The Marshall Project, June 18, 2020.

THE Reader's CATALOG
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A Moral Witness

Fintan O'Toole

Martha Gellhorn, Idaho, 1940

Robert Capa/International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos

Yours, for Probably Always: Martha Gellhorn's Letters of Love and War, 1930–1949
edited by Janet Somerville.
Firefly, 528 pp., $40.00

If journalism is a rough draft of history, then war reportage is very rough indeed. In the hurly-burly of violent conflict, journalists have none of the historian's Olympian overview of motives and consequences. The fog of war falls on correspondents as well as on generals—propaganda, prejudice, ignorance, and the need to tell engaging stories to faraway readers limit and distort their vision. Censorship and partisanship disguise the naked truth. War correspondents can seem, even to themselves, like parasites on misery. A corrosive cynicism drifts like mustard gas across the history of writing about war. Samuel Johnson set the tone in 1758:

> Among the calamities of war may be justly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates and credulity encourages. A peace will equally leave the warriour and the relator of Wars destitute of employment; and I know not whether more is to be dreaded from streets filled with Soldiers accustomed to plunder, or from garrets filled with Scribblers accustomed to lie.

Irvin McDowell, a Union general in the American Civil War, sardonically informed the first celebrity war correspondent, William Howard Russell of the London *Times*, that, in giving permission for journalists to enter a war zone, "I have suggested to them that they should wear a white uniform to indicate the purity of their character."

Martha Gellhorn was many things, including a novelist and short story writer, but a "relator of Wars" is the most important of them. She was certainly no saint and did not wear a white uniform. She was well aware of the treacherous allure of tall tales from the battlefront. She was, after all, married for five years to one of great spinners of self-aggrandizing narratives, Ernest Hemingway,[1] and it is no accident that, according to Caroline Moorehead's marvelous 2003 biography, Gellhorn coined the word *apocryphiars* for the habitual inventors of such fictions.[2] She was not immune to the self-contempt endemic to the business of turning violence and suffering into stories and money: in the 1959 introduction to her superb collection of reports, *The Face of War*, she describes herself as a "special type of war profiteer."

She was not a neutral observer—she cared far too much for democratic values and was too enraged by cruelty to believe in what she called "all that objectivity shit." She did not offer sweeping analyses of military and diplomatic strategies. She did not think, at least after the disillusionment that followed her early immersion in the Spanish Civil War, that journalism fed a public "love of truth." As she wrote in 1959, her faith in the "benign power of the press" had been broken: "Gradually I came to realize that people will more readily swallow lies than truth, as if the taste of lies was homey, appetizing: a habit." She had no illusions of influence: "For all the good our articles did, they might have been written in invisible ink, printed on leaves, and loosed to the wind." She felt, as she wrote to her lover and fellow war correspondent William Walton in 1949, "the absolute folly of journalism which at best reflects the vision of one person, and pretends to give an 'over-all picture.'"

Why, then, did she keep doing it for almost half a century, from the Spanish Civil War to the Soviet invasion of Finland, through the fall of Czechoslovakia, the Normandy landings and the liberation of Dachau, to the Vietnam War, the killing fields of El Salvador and Nicaragua during Ronald Reagan's dirty wars in the mid-1980s, and, when she was eighty-one, the US invasion of Panama? It was a matter of character and conscience, those most old-fashioned of virtues. She wrote to her beloved mother, Edna, when she was going to Vietnam in 1966, in a letter to be sent only in the event of her death that Janet Somerville (her stepdaughter) includes in *Yours, for Probably Always*, her enthralling collection of Gellhorn's correspondence from the 1930s and 1940s:

> It may be that the human race is on the way out, a failed species, and anything one tries to do is futile. But I think that even if I knew that was true, I would still believe that each individual is responsible for his conscience; and must live by his standards of right and wrong, as long as he breathes. All I know how to do is write: the only way I can write with any authority, in the hope of influencing even a very few people is to write from firsthand knowledge.

To witness other people's suffering and to write well about it was for her a way of being in the world, not a profession but an ethical act: "Serious, careful, honest journalism is essential, not because it is a guiding light, but because it is a form of honorable behavior, involving the reporter and the reader." How quaint that word, "honorable"—and how potent in our time, when the legitimacy of reportage is under such sustained assault. Male honor and its savage imperatives are the engines of war and atrocity. Gellhorn's honor drove her to record the consequences for others, especially for women, children, and refugees. On New Year's Day, 1945, while covering the war on the western front in Europe, she thought of "a wonderful New Year's resolution for the men who run the world: get to know the people who only live in it."

Gellhorn got to know, and taught her readers to know, the people who only live in the hellish worlds our rulers create. She devoted herself to what Edward Gibbon, in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, calls "the melancholy calculation of human calamities." This devotion is what makes her one of the great American moralists.

When Gellhorn first wrote about war, from Madrid in 1937, it was at the prompting of a man she rather coyly called in print "a journalist friend"—Hemingway. According to Moorehead, he asked her why she was not writing about the war. She replied, "I don't know about soldiers and weapons." Hemingway said, "Well, write about what you do know about, which is people." This was, of course, an established division of journalistic labor: the real stuff of war for the boys, "human interest" for the girls. Yet Gellhorn transformed a sexist imposition into a moral choice. She changed the angle of vision of war reporting from "soldiers and weapons" to "people." She redefined danger—that most potent allure of the war zone—from the heroism of sudden death to, as she wrote to her friend Eleanor Roosevelt in 1938, "lonely persecution and starvation and the fear of women alone in their flimsy houses with the children, when the night bombers come over."

Thus when she was not permitted to go with the male war correspondents officially covering the D-Day landings in June 1944, she managed instead to bluff her way onto a hospital ship, claiming that she was writing a story about the nurses. It was, she recalled in 1992, a "wonderful rap to say…it's a women's story, which is then regarded as of absolutely no interest at all and harmless." She locked herself in a toilet until the ship sailed and was then able to report on the great event from a uniquely up-close perspective. And watching a Jewish doctor care for a wounded German prisoner allowed her a characteristically laconic reflection on humanity in extremis: "We are helpless against our own decency really."

Gellhorn took "color" writing and made it darkly potent. By the 1960s, and the Vietnam War, US and South Vietnamese officialdom had begun to grasp just how dangerous she was. The war is remembered as one in which American reporters had unusually free access and a consequently powerful impact on public opinion at home. But Gellhorn, even though she was one of the most famous war correspondents, was effectively shut out from both access and impact. She made her own way to Vietnam in August 1966 and wrote a series of six long articles, but US newspapers declined to publish them. "Everywhere I was told that they were too tough for American readers," she told Philip Knightley in an interview for his skeptical book on war reporting, *The First Casualty*, published in 1975. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* eventually published two of the milder pieces, and the *Ladies' Home Journal*, of all places, published one. Only in Britain, in the *Guardian*, did the full series see the light of day.

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[1] See my "The Male Impersonator" in these pages, June 22, 2017.

[2] *Gellhorn: A Twentieth Century Life* (Henry Holt, 2003).

And when Gellhorn tried to return to Vietnam, her visa applications were consistently refused: "It appears I am on some sort of black list and I will not be allowed to report from South Vietnam again." Appeals to the US authorities for help were rebuffed. This did not happen to many other American journalists, certainly not to ones of Gellhorn's fame and stature.

What did she do to deserve this? Gellhorn, looking back in 1988, characterized her Vietnam reports as "a model of self-censorship," and wrote that "there are smarmy sentences in those reports that I wrote with gritted teeth." She did not reveal any secrets—everything she wrote about was, as she put it, "there for anyone to see, open, obvious." Her sin, rather, was to write about the war not as an American tragedy but as a Vietnamese one. She was interested in the otherwise anonymous victims of napalm dropped on villages, in the peasants uprooted from their homes in order to be "pacified," in "that distant, small, brown-skinned people, who do not look or live like us." She did not, like almost all the other journalists, follow the action; she followed its aftermath. She went to the refugee camps, the orphanages, and in particular the children's hospitals in the Mekong Delta. What is offensive in the pieces she wrote, what put them beyond the pale, is their human intimacy:

> The children have learned not to move, because moving hurts them more, but their eyes, large and dark, follow you....
>
> A child of seven, the size of our four-year-olds, lay in the cot by the door. Napalm had burned his face and back and one hand. The burned skin looked like swollen, raw meat; the fingers of his hand were stretched out, burned rigid. A scrap of cheesecloth covered him, for weight is intolerable, but so is air.

Decades earlier, while covering World War II in 1944, Gellhorn had mused in print that "perhaps it is impossible to understand anything unless it happened to you yourself." What we are experiencing in passages like this is something happening: to the child, to Gellhorn, and, through the melancholy calculation of those exquisitely weighted sentences, to us. "If you see something," Gellhorn says in a letter to her friend and former teacher Hortense Flexner in 1940, "you write it, to give the exact emotion to someone who did not see it." What's crucial, though, is the very particular balance between moral engagement and cool detachment we encounter in her writing—the engagement creates the emotion; the detachment holds it back so that it is not all used up by the reporter and enough space is left for the reader's feelings to be activated.

The technique here owes much to Hemingway—but what good writer's of the period doesn't? After she divorced him in 1945, Gellhorn always bristled at portrayals of herself as his protégé or sidekick. It is thus salutary to find her writing to her then lover Bertrand de Jouvenel in 1930, long before she met Hemingway, that he "has affected my style, which is really too bad." Like almost everyone else, she would have been influenced by the figure de Jouvenal refers to in 1932 as "the Great God Hemingway" even if she had never become entangled in his life and legend.

Gellhorn could write a scene like the one in the hospital so intimately because she felt it intimately. In some of her reports from Vietnam, that word "honor" is slipped in. The one sentence, tellingly, that the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* decided to cut from the piece it printed is a question about honor: "Is this an honorable way for a great nation to fight a war 10,000 miles from its safe homeland?" This is less an accusation than a confession. The sense of dishonor was deeply personal to her as an American. As she wrote of Vietnam to her friend Betsy Drake in June 1975, when the war had just ended, in a letter included in Moorehead's selection of her correspondence, "I felt it as a personal guilt and shame and horror."[3]

Gellhorn could never be the "walking tape recorder with eyes" that, as she put it during World War II, she aspired to be. While she claimed that "nothing about the reporter matters. What matters is the thing: the facts: what happened: how it was," this is not really true. Her "I" is as important as her eyes. She had written, as far back as 1934, in a letter to her friend Cam Beckett that

> you wouldn't believe how the world narrows when you have to say *I* instead of *She.* But I must do it; because writing is more than just putting words down on paper to fill the time, hoping for money to come and a dash of fame.... For me, it's my mind's and spirit's purge: there are certain things to be eternally rid of.

What matters in Gellhorn's reportage is not just "the facts" but how she defined what facts counted most and how she evoked them for her readers, and those choices were never separable from her conscience and her character. And while she seems startlingly rebellious in her private and professional lives, that character is a wondrous flowering of the early-twentieth-century progressive American bourgeoisie. Her mother, Edna, the driving force of the League of Women Voters in Gellhorn's hometown of St. Louis, writing to de Jouvenel in 1934, informs him that "we're very middle-class, somewhat conventional, sure that our only usefulness and happiness lies in service, sort of people." Her father, a gynecologist, was Jewish and had been born in Germany. Gellhorn wrote to Drake, "I was brought up in a good tough school whose basic instruction is: Get on with it. Somehow."

Moorehead, who was Gellhorn's friend as well as her biographer, recalled that "'buck up' was a phrase we all heard, when we strayed too near to self-pity." Duty, indefatigability, and an underlying sense of the importance of being earnest in the pursuit of justice are the values Gellhorn held to. It is apt that her political and personal lodestar was Eleanor Roosevelt, who, perhaps more than any other twentieth-century American figure, embodied those values in public action. Gellhorn's letters to and from Roosevelt (with whom she sometimes stayed in the White House) are among the treasures of Somerville's rich collection.

If this is where the engagement comes from, how did she maintain that remarkable counterweight of detachment? Reading her letters allows us to see not just the "I" who witnessed so much but also Gellhorn's capacity to stand outside that self. Parallel to her war journalism, the letters to her lovers and intimate friends involve a remarkable feat of reportage on the war within Gellhorn herself. It is a conflict most crudely defined by Hemingway when he cabled her from Cuba, while she was away covering World War II: "ARE YOU A WAR CORRESPONDENT OR WIFE IN MY BED?" Gellhorn knew damn well what the answer was but there was for her a much more complex and perhaps unanswerable question: How could she be a woman while occupying so male a space in the world?

When Gellhorn took up with de Jouvenel, a married man who stayed married, her father, disapprovingly, said to her that "there are two kinds of women and you are the other kind." Gellhorn was always indeed the "other kind" of gender: she had to make her life in a no-man's-land between the proper femininity she rejected and the masculinity she could not have. Writing to her in 1934, de Jouvenel claimed that if Gellhorn provoked his wife to take legal action against them, "it would be something as destructive as when Oscar Wilde attacked Queensberry." The evocation of the most infamous queer scandal may be over the top but was not entirely inapt. For Gellhorn certainly did not fit into her era's binary oppositions of male and female, and the result was not just that others did not know quite what to make of her, but that she was never quite sure what to make of herself.

Gellhorn, blond and long-legged, was well aware of—and not at all displeased by—her sexual attractiveness to men: "I am," she wrote to Cam Beckett in 1934, "considered to be rather beautiful, with a good body." It was one of her professional assets. She wrote to Drake in 1972, "Though I never used them for sexual attraction, my looks were a passport which somehow made tolerable the interruption of a furious woman, bullying powerful people to be concerned about unpowerful people." But on the other hand, she reveled in being one of the boys, in the hard-drinking swagger of reporters and fighters. Her voice, as Ward Just put it, "had so much gravel in it you could walk on it."

Sexual connection eluded her. She wrote to Allen Grover from Paris in 1936 of her female friends' diagnosis: "They are now decided that I am a lesbian because no men mar the scenery, because I deny the gloating satisfaction in physical love whereof they all brag." In that letter of 1934, de Jouvenel calls himself "half-a-man and you half-a-woman" because she did not share his sexual pleasure in their couplings. He blamed himself for the "violent physical incompatibility" that existed between them, and called himself an "incompetent lover." But Gellhorn clearly felt the failure to be her own. She told him she was "going to see a doctor about my lack of sexual reaction." She wrote to him of

> how I failed you, being unable to give you complete joy in sexual love—because I was unable to attain that climax; and how I even faked it on occasions when you had tried and I felt your wretchedness at failure.

Sex and love would not, for Gellhorn, cohere into a settled sense of herself as a woman. It seems that the real male love of her life was the great war photographer Robert Capa—even though (perhaps because) "there was never, not for one minute ever, the slightest sexual attraction between us." She did not find Hemingway physically attractive, even though she married him. "He needed me to run his house and to copulate on (I use the adverb advisedly, not with but on) and to provide exercise in the way of a daily tennis game," she wrote to Drake in 1974.

Her friend Leonard Bernstein told Gellhorn he wrote the song "100 Easy Ways to Lose a Man" (from *Wonderful Town*) with her in mind, but her letters show that breaking up, however frequently she did it, was hard for her to do. It forced her to confront the ways in which she was not a "woman" in the sense that her male lovers could understand the idea, and—much more painfully—in the way she understood it. In 1950 she told David Gurewitsch—Eleanor Roosevelt's friend and personal physician, with whom Gellhorn was then in love—"I am not good enough to be a pair, to belong to a man." She added:

> I have not even thought of myself as a woman much before.... I have done nothing but fail, as a woman, because I never felt like one really.... I have consciously used what I suppose must be sex appeal (but what a cheap thing it is: all women have it) for vanity, from loneliness, from doubt, or simply to exert power.

In 1958, when she was fifty, she wrote to Rosamond Lehmann:

> I still have a few friends, men, (not quite the same as the others, the first ones) and they and the dead have always mattered more to me than any lovers. Lovers somehow never seemed serious; there was something I couldn't quite believe—and even in the most anguishing intoxicating depths of a love affair, I would always rather be with my friends, who were my own people and where I belonged. I found this very queer (I bet you do too), very unwomanly & probably neuter of me. I only loved the world of men—not the world of men-and-women. I only loved the men as they were themselves, not as they became in relation to women. Perhaps I am simply a born visitor—meant to go, as a stranger, into someone else's territory, having none of my own.

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[3] See *The Selected Letters of Martha Gellhorn*, edited by Caroline Moorehead (Henry Holt, 2006).

This is distressing and poignant, but it also gets to the nub of the reason why Gellhorn's sense of being unwomanly was a source not just of personal anguish but of her great power as a journalist. The "I" of her reportage, the witnessing self, can never be a pompous, arrogant omniscient persona. It never loses its vigilant self-awareness. It is a hard-won construct, distilled from a deep loneliness, a radical uncertainty, and a consequent habit (so vibrantly manifest in her letters) of merciless self-analysis. It is also what allows her, even in those moments of almost unbearably intimate confrontation with the suffering of others, to be the perfect stranger in another's territory, the emissary from the zone of human calamities to the land where people are comfortable enough to want to read all about it.

Her journalistic work is so closely intertwined with terrible historical events that it seems odd to say that Gellhorn was really an anti-historian. Her dispatches were not first drafts of history; they were letters from eternity. She wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt in 1939 that "perhaps because I try to be a writer, perhaps because I am a woman, I cannot avoid seeing history always in terms of people." To see history—at least the history of war—in terms of people is to see it not as a linear process but as a series of terrible repetitions: what happens to human flesh in episodes of organized violence is always and everywhere the same. It is her ability to capture the precise and particular while doing justice to the terrible futility of this sameness that makes Gellhorn's reportage so genuinely timeless. When we read her, we are simultaneously drawn into the uniqueness of a moment and into the undertow of her distraught awareness that this moment, in its essence, has happened before and will happen again.

As early as 1935, her regular correspondent Allen Grover wrote to Gellhorn that "I should one day publish your collected letters. They're magnificent prose." They are—and they are also precious traces of the turbulent, passionate, relentless, self-examined inner life of a woman of honor whose indomitable character is beautifully summed up by her mother in Somerville's invigorating collection: "She lacks everything that makes living easy, she possesses most things that make it worthwhile."

Syria's Lost Chance

Robert F. Worth

Prince Faisal and his delegation, including T.E. Lawrence (third from right), at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919

How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance
by Elizabeth F. Thompson.
Atlantic Monthly, 466 pp., $30.00

On June 29, 1920, the Syrian envoy Habib Lutfallah stood before a committee of French senators in the Luxembourg Palace, that vast, baroque monument to France's *grand siècle.* He had come to Paris to make a plea for an autonomous Arab state in the lands of the defeated Ottoman Empire. It was late in the day, and the odds were very long: France's Army of the Levant was already massing in what is now Lebanon, preparing to march eastward and impose a neocolonial regime on Damascus.

Lutfallah appealed first to the senators' consciences, arguing that Syria was a civilized country capable of governing itself. But he also had the wisdom to tell them that France would be better served by a whole and independent Syria than a cluster of weak and fractious states. "In Balkanizing Asia Minor," Lutfallah said, "in multiplying small principalities, dust particles of states, [France] leaves the road open to the anarchy that will create an endemic state of war."

The senators were not moved. The French conquered Damascus less than a month later in a bizarre and unequal battle that pitted loyalist African conscripts armed with tanks and machine guns against a ragged force of Syrians equipped with sticks and swords. ("We can crush a few negroes" was one of the Syrian battle cries.) The British, meanwhile, imposed their own rule over Iraq, where they strafed and bombed the people of that newly established country into submission.

The Europeans tried to cast themselves as liberators: they had vanquished the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled the Middle East for centuries. But they imposed new borders that cut across some of the region's ancient trade routes and ethnic enclaves and set up new national governments with their own satraps in charge. Their rhetorical concessions to Arab sovereignty—intended mostly to appease US president Woodrow Wilson, the period's great champion of national self-determination—were hollow. Even British prime minister David Lloyd George conceded that the mandate system established by the new League of Nations was nothing but "a substitute for the old Imperialism."

A century later, it is easy to see Lutfallah's warning as prophetic. The anarchy and endemic war he spoke of are now a daily reality in much of the Middle East. The roots of this ongoing tragedy are not simple, but they can be traced at least in part to Europe's redrawing of the postwar map in London and Paris and San Remo. To the people of the region, those neocolonial dictates have acquired a mythic status as a kind of original sin. Arab schoolchildren are taught early about the villainy of Sir Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, the British and French officials who outlined the new borders in a secret agreement in 1916. Even ISIS adheres to this interpretation of Arab history: after it captured Mosul in 2014, its fighters bulldozed the earthen berms marking the border between Syria and Iraq and declared (prematurely) that they had achieved "the end of Sykes-Picot."

Many Westerners familiar with this history may not know that the Arabs did have a brief moment of independence and democratic experimentation in Syria, between the collapse of the Ottomans after World War I and the assertion of French rule in 1920. This period of slightly less than two years is the subject of Elizabeth Thompson's illuminating new book, *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs*, which breaks new ground in its discussion of the efforts of Syria's short-lived National Congress to fuse liberal constitutionalism and Islam. This synthesis—the creation of an ideological common ground—is immensely important because its absence has wreaked havoc in the Arab countries ever since. One reason for the failure of the 2011 uprisings of the Arab Spring was the unbridgeable divide between Islamists and liberals, a divide that is partly a legacy of the colonial period and has been deftly exploited by the region's dictators.

Thompson is a historian at American University who has written extensively on evolving conceptions of justice in Middle Eastern societies. Her previous book, *Justice Interrupted: The Struggle for Constitutional Government in the Middle East* (2013), analyzed various reformist movements and figures from the last two centuries. Her new one is aimed at a more general audience, and she has oversimplified the moral contours of her tale a little, likening one French administrator to Iago and playing up the Syrians' hunger for democracy. But she succeeds in restoring the strangeness, and the lost potential, of this aborted moment of self-rule.

Syria was a shattered country in 1918, its landscape burned and pillaged, its inhabitants emaciated from years of famine. It was also alive with new possibilities, as people slowly recognized that the Ottoman order, with its static hierarchies of pasha and notable and peasant, was dying. One contemporary described Damascus in language that recalls Orwell's evocation two decades later of revolutionary Barcelona as a place where "servile and even ceremonial forms of speech" fell away during the short-lived Spanish republic:

> Freedom in all its aspects ruled—including freedom of association, speech, and publishing—which

> were envied in other parts of Syria and Egypt. The exaggerated salutations and aggrandizements of officials and notables (that Damascus was famous for) disappeared. People sensed their own honor and dignity.

Beyond Damascus, Syria's identity was up for grabs, its borders wildly uncertain. Most Arab nationalists considered *Bilad al-Sham*, or Greater Syria, to include all or most of what is now Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan, as well as part of present-day Turkey. But some influential figures in Aleppo were lobbying for union with the new republic being formed to the north in Turkey. Most of the Christians in Mount Lebanon and the Alawites of the northwest—a downtrodden group who feared the Sunni Muslim majority—sought the protection of France. To the south, the Zionist movement was reshaping the demography and future of Palestine.

Nor was there any unifying political ideology. Arab nationalism, as the Iraqi historian and politician Ali Allawi (now Iraq's finance minister) writes in his biography of King Faisal I of Iraq, was "an evolving idea and its adherents ranged across the entire spectrum of political opinion."[1] Some justified their break with the Ottomans on religious rather than national grounds, arguing that Turkish rule had been insufficiently Islamic. Many pined for a new caliphate, to be centered in Mecca or perhaps Mosul, and led by an Arab.

The most obvious candidate to head such a state was the leader of the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans, the man who would become King Faisal. Faisal bin Hussein bin Ali al-Hashimi was a war hero and the son of the sharif of Mecca, and that combination gave him immense legitimacy. Many men and women found Faisal irresistible. "His face was one of the most attractive I have ever seen, beautifully shaped, with clear, dark eyes," wrote one member of an American delegation in 1919. Even the straight-backed British commander, General Edmund Allenby, could not help remarking that Faisal's "hands are as fine as a woman's," though he was "a strong-willed man with upright convictions."

Faisal's most important admirer was T.E. Lawrence, the British officer, diplomat, and mythmaker who fought alongside him against the Ottomans and helped him become Syria's first king when the war ended. Both Thompson and Allawi present Faisal as a man of enormous gifts who found himself in a tragic position, caught between the arrogance of the Europeans and the Syrians' demands for total independence. Faisal's instinct was to find a middle ground, but by the end of his time in Syria there was none.

The real hero of Thompson's story is equally magnetic but less well known in the West. Rashid Rida was an Islamic reformer and intellectual who began dreaming of an independent Syria years before the Ottoman Empire fell. Born just outside the Syrian coastal city of Tripoli (now in Lebanon), Rida moved to British-ruled Egypt in 1897 to escape Ottoman censorship and to study with Muhammad Abduh, an influential Muslim thinker. The following year he founded a reformist journal in Cairo called *The Lighthouse* and built a global reputation writing for it. He appears to have hedged his bets during World War I; he had no love for the Turks, but he considered the caliphate, based in Istanbul, an essential institution for all Muslims, and he worried that an Allied victory might mean European interference in Arab lands.

In October 1918 Rida heard that Faisal had ridden into Damascus, having vanquished (with considerable help from the British) the Ottoman garrison and its confederated band of German soldiers. With Faisal was a group of exultant young friends and advisers who had been dreaming of an autonomous Arab state for years. They belonged to a secret league called al-Fatat (the Young Arab Society), formed during the twilight years of the Ottomans. They knew that the British and French, who had carved up the Levant between them two years earlier, were an obstacle, but they were giddy and optimistic. So was Rida. He was still stuck in Cairo—the British wouldn't give him a travel pass—but he was so excited about the new Syrian state that he began drafting a constitution almost immediately.

Rida didn't get to Damascus until late 1919. He was a portly man of nearly fifty-four, and his cleric's gown and turban stood out among Faisal's younger acolytes, who often wore European clothes. He brought a welcome gravitas to the state-building effort, and within a few months he became the president of the new Syrian National Congress. He had thought more deeply than anyone else about the issues the Congress would face. As early as 1915, when the war's outcome was far from clear, he had sketched an "organic law" for a future Syrian nation that would enshrine popular sovereignty and separate religion from the state.

Four years later Rida became an essential intermediary between secular liberals and religious conservatives in the Congress. They disagreed on a number of fundamental issues, including the political status of Islam, the balance of power between king and Congress, and, perhaps most sensitive of all, the relative influence of the country's religious and ethnic minorities. Syria still had a sizable Jewish community, as well as large groups of Druze, Christians, and Alawites (who were then widely considered non-Muslims). Many of them were profoundly anxious about their future, and with good reason: the Armenian genocide had just taken place only a few hundred miles to the north.

The compromise Rida oversaw was far ahead of its time. The constitution named Islam as the religion of Syria's king but said nothing about the religion of its people, and the delegates came close to granting women's suffrage at a time when women still could not vote in France. The question of sovereignty was difficult, and it came to a head during a confrontation between Rida and Faisal in March 1920: the members of Congress had voted to make the cabinet responsible to them, not to the king. This infuriated Faisal, who saw himself as the Congress's, and Syria's, final arbiter. "I am the one who founded it and I don't give it the right to obstruct the government," Faisal told Rida when they met in the palace. "No, it is the Congress that appointed *you*!" Rida replied. In the end, Faisal backed down and conceded the superior authority of the Congress.

Thompson calls this exchange "a legendary moment in Syrian history." She sees Rida and his associates as betrayed heroes, and her book invites us to imagine an alternative outcome. If not for the French invasion, Syrians might have had a say in setting their own borders and in shaping their first attempts at national identity. The country's new institutions would not have carried the taint of colonial tutelage, and Syria's political factions—especially its liberals and Islamists—might have been more willing to find common ground.

There is some reason to believe they could have succeeded. In the final decades of Ottoman rule, an idea of pluralist coexistence had been taking shape, according to the historian Ussama Makdisi, who has called it the "ecumenical frame."[2] It was represented in part by the Ottoman Decentralization Party, which attracted Rashid Rida and other Arabs hoping for more latitude and autonomy. Rida was inspired by the Young Turk revolution of 1908, which restored a more liberal constitution and allowed multiparty politics to thrive. Many Christians also saw promise in the idea of a looser, more tolerant incarnation of the Ottoman Empire. These ideas persisted after the Ottomans fell, and it is tempting to think that Rashid Rida and King Faisal might together have built a Syria that balanced religiosity and tolerance, diversity and order.

Behind this wishful fantasy lurks a political point, and Thompson states it bluntly in her preface. She aims, she writes,

> to slay the demons that still misguide our media and our policy by demonstrating that the true cause of dictatorship and the antiliberal Islamist threat lies in the events of a century ago, not in the eternal traits of so-called Oriental culture.

This line brought me up short. I've met plenty of Western diplomats and soldiers while reporting in the Middle East over the past two decades, and while some of them had predictably crude ideas about Arab culture and religion, I doubt those ideas had much influence on foreign policy. Perhaps some polemical overstatement is forgivable in a preface aimed at Western readers. It is certainly true that the twenty-year French mandate distorted Syria's political culture. But Arab democracy faced many other obstacles, some of them generated by the six centuries of Turkish rule.

Even the democratic achievements of the Syrian Congress may be slightly deceptive, because Rida and his fellow constitution-writers were performing for an audience. They believed a display of Western-style self-government just might win them enough international sympathy to stave off a French invasion, and that conviction affected everything they did during their twenty-two-month experiment. Faisal spent much of it in Paris and London, pleading his cause to European statesmen while his country floundered.

He had little choice. Wilson, Lloyd George, and French prime minister Georges Clemenceau's priorities were in Europe, and it was all Faisal could do to get their attention. He was keenly aware that his every word and gesture would count; even his choice of clothes carried potential political meaning. When he delivered his plea for Arab independence at the Paris Peace Conference in February 1919, Faisal chose to wear his Arab robes and scimitar. But soon afterward he began wearing a tunic and trousers around Paris, with a long overcoat. Emphasizing his native culture, Thompson writes, "had been a gamble. While it had attracted public notice, it had also invited Europeans to regard him as an exotic and medieval Oriental out of the *Arabian Nights* stories."

This theatrical aspect of Syria's struggle for independence may have reached its crescendo in June 1919, when an American delegation arrived with the aim of assessing Syria's capacity for self-government. The King-Crane Commission had been dispatched to the Middle East from Paris at Wilson's insistence, flouting the preferences of the British and French. He had told the Europeans that he "had never been able to see by what right France and Great Britain gave this country away to anyone." He appointed his friend Charles Crane, a well-traveled heir to a plumbing-parts empire and a lover of Arab culture, as the group's coleader and chief spokesman, along with the scholar Henry King.

Faisal saw the commission's visit as a crucial audition, as did his Fatat advisers. He feted its members with lavish banquets, and over the following days a series of Syrian delegations presented the Americans with signed petitions and pleas for independence. One group told them that Syria would accept only an American mandate, because "America loves humanity, entered the war on behalf of oppressed nations, will not colonize, and is very rich." Another was led by Muslim women, who passionately rebutted the condescending stereotypes often heard in the West:

> Realizing that all we have suffered has been the result of subjugation...we crave for ourselves not merely independence of existence, but the right and opportunity to a development which will assure us a place among the responsible nations of the world.

Thompson narrates these scenes with great sympathy and appears to believe that something true and authentic is whispering to us across the decades. Other historians have been more skeptical.

There was a deliberate (and successful) campaign to shape the commission's views, including leaflets in the streets calling for Syrians to maintain intercommunal harmony during the visit. The elite figures who scripted these efforts were, in effect, tailoring themselves to a Western audience, and that may have limited their engagement with their fellow Syrians. In *Divided Loyalties* (1999), a fascinating study of mass politics in Faisal's Syria, James L. Gelvin writes that

> the nationalist elites who prepared for the commission's arrival de-

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[1] Ali A. Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq* (Yale University Press, 2014), p. 162.

[2] Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (University of California Press, 2019).

> signed their demonstrations and propaganda campaigns for the purpose of presenting to an outside audience an image of a sophisticated nation eager and prepared for independence. But in the process of converting Syria into a large Potemkin village, they failed to integrate the majority of the population into their nationalist project.

Syria's workers, peasants, and tradesmen had little stake in Faisal's national ambitions, and some of them later joined their own anticolonial movement, one that was more religious and more violent.

A similar self-consciousness permeated the writing of Syria's constitution during the spring and summer of 1920. It was an extraordinary achievement, which the French clearly recognized: after imposing the mandate, they did everything they could to stamp out all memory of the constitution and the democratic promise it appeared to suggest. (Thompson spent months trying to find an original copy and was unable to.) But the constitution was written partly as an exercise in public relations, to prove a point to the world.

The message went unheard. By the time the King-Crane Commission returned to the United States, Wilson had had a stroke from which he would never fully recover. The commission's report, a robust endorsement of Syria's capacity for self-rule, was filed away and not published for two years. There was a fair amount of American sympathy for the report's conclusions, but no real willingness to get involved in a Middle Eastern conflict. France's colonialists bulldozed over all objections.

Faisal made a last-minute effort—against popular resistance—to accept a French mandate, in the hopes of averting war and preserving his government in some form. His commanders had already told him they had so few bullets and trained soldiers that the battle might only last minutes. But his message to the French army command did not arrive until after the troops had left their camps and the call to jihad had gone out from the minarets of Damascus. The battle that took place at Maysalun on July 24, 1920, was a massacre: more than 1,200 Syrians were killed and only forty-two French.

Faisal was allowed to leave the country afterward, and the following year his British friends drafted him to become the first king of Iraq. That venture went much more smoothly. Backed by British guns and airplanes, Faisal held onto his second throne, though the trauma of the country's violent birth took its toll. When he died in 1933 he was only forty-eight, but looked a dozen years older.

The French colonial administration that succeeded Faisal's government in Syria made no effort to respect the country's sovereignty. It embarked on a cynical campaign to separate sectarian communities from one another and cities from rural areas, playing especially to Christian and Alawite fears of Muslim fanaticism. After a revolt broke out in the Druze countryside in 1925, the French crushed it violently, killing thousands of rebels and leveling much of Damascus and other cities with artillery fire.

In Thompson's account, French colonial policy is personified by Robert de Caix, a manipulative, pointy-bearded aristocrat who derided his opponents as "Wilsonian nitwits." He is a deliciously odious character, but to focus on him is to eclipse some of this story's larger setting. France's conduct in Syria was driven less by a thirst for conquest than by a fatal misalignment. Europe was consumed by its own trauma: a war more destructive than anything humanity had ever known. Britain had suffered almost a million dead; France had lost some 1.7 million. The statesmen who met in Paris could not return to all those war widows without some recompense, some measure of *gloire* to honor the fallen, even if it came in the form of a Syrian satrapy. They also believed that balancing French and British imperial claims would help secure the peace. The war, after all, had been ignited in part by a failure to maintain equilibrium among Europe's interlocking empires.

Even so, French opinion on Syria was not uniform. Clemenceau, the grand old man of the French left, was an enemy of colonialism, as was most of the Socialist Party. But the jingoists won out, and most French people were too exhausted by war to care. Only a handful of Europeans knew enough about Syria to see past the crude distortions in the press. At least two French colonial officers in Damascus—Edouard Cousse and Antoine Toulat—sympathized with Faisal and seem to have understood that imposing military rule would lead to disaster. They were overruled, like so many perceptive junior Western diplomats from India to Vietnam to Iraq.

Although Thompson does not speculate about it, it is also possible that Faisal's kingdom would have collapsed even if the French had left him alone. Syria was desperately poor and had been utterly dependent on British and French subsidies. Syrians were divided along lines of sect, class, region, and ethnicity—and not just because of French manipulations. Many Christians and virtually all Alawites resisted Faisal's rule. The very idea of a secular government was widely contested. Even Rida conceded that most Syrian Muslims found it unfamiliar and illegitimate, and said "they would overturn it in favor of a religious one at the first opportunity."

Rida often seems to have felt the same way. For all his relative liberalism on some subjects, he also believed passionately that the Arab world needed a caliphate—an idea that was later taken up by Hasan al-Banna, the Egyptian founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, who considered Rida a mentor. After the new secular government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk dissolved the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, Rida began hungering for a replacement, and his thought took a more conservative turn. If Syria had been spared by the French, he might eventually have pushed its government in a more Islamic direction.

A POETRY MANUAL

1. *Longhand*
One part only of me moving.
The rest of me keeping shtum.

2. *Equipment*
My fingers taper to a point.
The nib shows willing.

3. *Method*
Not one bit like keyboard keys
with their busy, busy, busy.

4. *Technology*
One shimmy of a sudden line
suddenly strikes through it all.

5. *Add-ons*
The lack of a word-count facility,
of the feint of a change of font.

6. *Archive*
Each new poem written off the back of the previous one.

7. *Soundscape A*
Small scratchings like a bird in a thicket. Robin, possibly.

8. *Soundscape B*
My arm across the paper, its slight taffeta shift.

9. *Proposition*
That ink warmed by my body moves the freer for it.

10. *Sinister*
While my right hand is playing with these words,
what do you suppose my left is doing?

—Vona Groarke

Religion aside, the idea of equal citizenship faced heavy resistance from Syria's paternalistic elite and its suspicious communal leaders. These traditional attitudes—engrained by centuries of Ottoman divide-and-rule policy—persisted long after Syria finally gained its formal independence in 1946 (the French had effectively been evicted five years earlier, after the defeat of Vichy French forces by the British). One renowned Syrian diplomat, Adnan al-Atassi, wrote of his dismay after attending the opening session of the new Syrian parliament in 1943, when it became clear that what he called "*al za'ama al-shakhsiyya*" ("personal leadership," meaning more or less rule by strongmen) was taking precedence over law and the constitution.

Thompson appears to believe that these postwar struggles reflect a colonial distortion and not the legacy of earlier traditions. Two decades of French rule, she writes, "utterly transformed Syria's political landscape" and paved the way for the police state that has held the country in its grip since the 1960s. Here again, I find her emphasis on French villainy a little excessive. Syria's dreaded security services probably owe more to the legacy of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, who starting in the 1950s built the prototype of the modern Arab dictatorship that was imitated across the Middle East. The French legacy was not all bad. The educational and industrial institutions they built helped the country to thrive in the years after World War II, when Syria's economy grew at 6 to 8 percent a year. Vast cotton and grain farms sprang up in the rural north and east, and the Jazeera region became a breadbasket. The French-designed parliamentary system, for all its flaws, offered a measure of political freedom, and political parties and newspapers flourished.

The French do bear a heavy burden of responsibility for empowering a downtrodden group whose sectarian fears helped to shape modern Syria. It was during their mandate that the colonial authorities, suspicious of Syria's Sunni Muslim majority, began packing the security services with recruits from the religious minorities. Alawite officers eventually took control of the military, and in 1970 one of them, an air force pilot named Hafez al-Assad, installed himself as dictator. His son, Bashar al-Assad, now presides over a Syria that is in ruins after almost a decade of civil war.

Although the fighting has mostly subsided, the future looks darker in many ways than it did a century ago. Assad has bargained away much of his sovereignty to Iran and Russia. The northeast is a lawless desert, crisscrossed by Kurdish rebels, Turkish-backed militias, and jihadists. Punishing sanctions and the economic collapse of Lebanon—Syria's financial gateway to Western markets and banks—have brought many people to the brink of starvation. Cities like Aleppo, gutted by years of bombing and shelling, will not be rebuilt soon. Perhaps things would have been different if the Syrians had been left to govern themselves a century ago. It is hard to imagine a bleaker landscape than the one they face today. □

Poems Without an 'I'

Madeleine Thien

The Banished Immortal:
A Life of Li Bai (Li Po)
by Ha Jin.
Pantheon, 301 pp.,
$28.00; $17.00 (paper)

The Selected Poems of Tu Fu:
Expanded and Newly Translated
by David Hinton.
New Directions, 267 pp., $18.95 (paper)

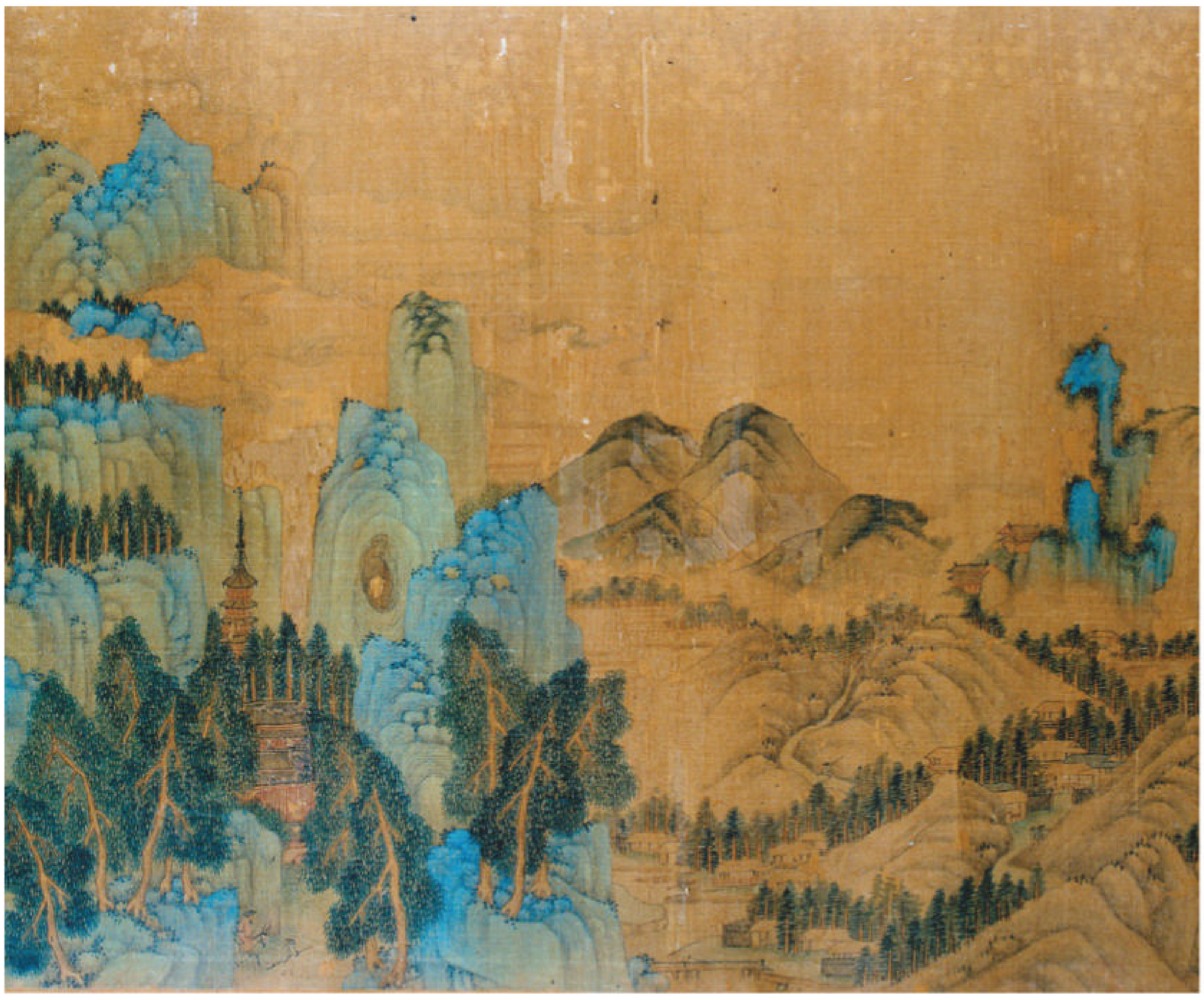
Awakened Cosmos:
The Mind of Classical
Chinese Poetry
by David Hinton.
Shambhala, 138 pp.,
$17.95 (paper)

Du Fu and Li Bai, widely regarded as the two greatest poets in Chinese history, are still quoted by dictators and businessmen, students and dissidents. Lines from their verses have been embedded in the Chinese language for more than a millennium. Both poets were born during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), at the height of its sophistication and influence. In their middle age both suffered the horrors of the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763), a catastrophic civil war whose warning signs the government had ignored. Within seven years, two thirds of the Chinese population were dead, disappeared, or displaced. The rebellion was put down with the costly military assistance of Uighur troops, but the Tang Dynasty never recovered its former unity.

About a decade before the civil war started, Li Bai and Du Fu met several times in the course of a single year, 744–745, but never again. Both were called to serve, very briefly, in the Tang court; Li Bai was later found guilty of treason and exiled. Both men—Li Bai a hotheaded, ungovernable Daoist; Du Fu, a decade younger, a doting father and upright Confucian—became internal refugees when their country imploded in the rebellion. Du Fu wrote more than a dozen poems about Li Bai, and when the older poet became a pariah, Du Fu was one of the few to defend him. Both Li Bai and Du Fu attempted to understand the political disintegration around them by taking on subjects that normally remained outside Tang poetry. Their work was startling in its artistry and breadth—and still is, in a China that is again changing rapidly. Each died convinced he'd wasted his talent, at the margins of the empire he longed to serve.

The novelist Ha Jin's eighteenth book, *The Banished Immortal*, retrieves Li Bai from the legends that surround him, chronicling the life of this visionary artist in a collapsing political order. It is the first full-length biography of Li Bai in English and comes to us from a writer whose own celebrated works are banned at home. Born in China in 1956, Ha Jin was ten when the Cultural Revolution began. At fourteen, he joined the People's Liberation Army and was dispatched to the wilderness of the Soviet border. After the death of Mao in 1976, Chinese universities reopened, and Ha Jin studied English. In 1985, at the age of age twenty-nine, he arrived in the United States to study for a degree in American literature at Brandeis University.

The 1989 Tiananmen massacre devastated him; he understood it would be impossible for him to make a life in China, and he began to write in English. Since then he has published eight novels, four collections each of poetry and short fiction, and one book of essays. He has been repeatedly denied visas to return home; he gave up applying when his mother, whom he had not seen for thirty years, died in 2014. When asked how he imagines his audience now that he writes in English, Ha Jin replied by quoting John Berryman: a poet writes "for the dead whom thou didst love."



Landscape painting, Tang dynasty era (618–907)

Werner Forman/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

Ha Jin evokes the China of Li Bai as a refraction of our own moment; Li Bai's country before the An Lushan Rebellion was "much more open than the China of our time," but its economic inequities will be brutally familiar to anyone in today's Shanghai, Delhi, London, or New York. Li Bai was an egalitarian, which made him beloved in the local taverns but anathema at court.

Born in 701 in what is now Tokmok, Kyrgyzstan, Li Bai was a child of the borderlands. His mother is believed to have been of Turkic origin. His father made his fortune from caravans selling fabrics, paper, and wine. Li Bai was five when the family relocated—or fled—to Sichuan province in southwestern China. This grueling six-month journey through vast deserts, wilderness, and high mountain passes exerted a hold on his imagination for the rest of his life; his description of "the wind, tens of thousands of miles long" blowing through Yumen Pass is part of the Chinese lexicon.

From the start, Li Bai showed an energetic mind, and his father hoped he would enter the civil service. As a merchant, his father belonged to a "dishonorable" part of society, and Li Bai was therefore barred from sitting for the imperial examinations. Then, as now, Ha Jin writes, "the best way to safeguard one's interests in China has been to affiliate oneself with political power—to befriend high officials and even join their occupation." For those of Li Bai's background, government positions could be attained only through *zhiju*, recommendations made by influential patrons.

Throughout much of China's history, poems served as calling cards, résumés, thank you notes, political tracts, spiritual meditations; they revealed a man's erudition, temperament, and genius. At seventeen Li Bai set out to make his mark. In elite salons, his heavy Sichuan accent made him seem like "a country bumpkin in an expensive robe," yet the ingenuity and spontaneity of his poems brought him immediate acclaim. Ha Jin provides a number of his own translations, including of "Reflection in a Quiet Night," written when Li Bai was twenty-five (and which, for the last thousand years, "every Chinese with a few years' schooling has learned by heart"), and the beloved long poem "Please Drink":

Heaven begot a talent like me and
must put me to good use
And a thousand cash in gold,
squandered, will come again
. . . Since ancient times saints and
sages have been obscure,
But only drinkers have left behind
their names.

Li Bai crisscrossed the country singing his songs and writing them on walls. It was said that he could drink anyone under the table. His closest friends—barmen, recluses, farmers, aspiring officials—lent him money, gave him shelter, or shared their home brew. Listeners called him *zhexian* (banished immortal); he called himself "the great roc," after the giant mythological bird. "The locals were impressed by his words," writes Ha Jin with some understatement, "especially when he was tipsy and raving with abandon. Never had they met such a loquacious man." But Li Bai rattled men of influence. A genius, they thought, but a loose cannon. They couldn't risk association with such intemperance and declined to recommend him for a position—at the time a man like him might expect to be appointed to an influential government post if not directly to court.

He soon began to grasp his predicament: poets were welcome at parties and rewarded with gold and even a good horse, but they were little more than entertainment. The emperor was taxing the populace to bankruptcy and launching vanity wars. One by one, Li Bai's closest friends retreated from the political life of the capital, and he continued to roam, leaving behind his wife, whose given name is lost to history. Ha Jin writes movingly of how she lived a "lonely married life" and observes that Li Bai's most celebrated love poems are addressed to other women.

His writings for his wife reveal a different ache; having failed to secure a position, he was ashamed to go home. Usually drunk, he was prone to depression, and his love was "willful and somewhat selfish." Yet for a brief time, when Li Bai gave up his quest for promotion, he and his wife found comfort together. She died shortly after the birth of their second child, and he married a second time for the sole purpose of finding a mother for his children. Ha Jin observes that his life was essentially one of "endless wanderings . . . as though he was doomed to remain a guest in this world." In 727, he composed a farewell to his beloved friend Meng Haoran, and its lines have since been recited by countless Chinese who have endured separation:

My friend is sailing west, away from
Yellow Crane Tower.
Through the March blossoms he is
going down to Yangzhou.
His sail casts a single shadow in the
distance, then disappears,
Nothing but the Yangtze flowing on
the edge of the sky.

In 742, at the age of forty-one, humiliated by his repeated failure to secure a position, Li Bai was presented one day with a large red envelope. Emperor Xuanzong was personally summoning him to the capital. Jubilant, Li Bai set brush to paper: "How can a man/Like myself stay in the weeds for too long?" He became the talk of the country, especially when word spread that the emperor, in front of courtiers, had insisted on personally ladling out Li Bai's small bowl of soup.

Bored by the "mannered and subdued works" esteemed in literary circles and standardized by court officials, Li Bai sought a new way of speaking. He found

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in ancient poems, the *Songs of Chu* anthology, folk songs, and the learned poems known as *gufeng*—written a thousand years earlier and prized for their incantatory power, exuberance, and raw immediacy—an artistic lineage.

His contemporaries described him reciting verses spontaneously, as if on currents of energy or madness and as intricately as a master swordsman. His admirers, Ha Jin writes, describe Li Bai "pouring out lines without premeditation. Every word, every line, and every rhyme were in place—the poem was perfectly wrought at the very first attempt."

Li Bai gave full-throated voice to the lives of others: boat pullers, innkeepers, courtesans, weaving women, conscripts, drinkers. In "Midnight Songs," he speaks in the voice of women whose husbands have been conscripted:

> *The emissary will start out tomorrow*
> *morning,*
> *So we are busy tonight sewing robes*
> *for our men.*
> *Bony hands are pulling cold needles*
> *And it's hard to handle scissors for a*
> *whole night.*
> *What we've made will travel a long*
> *way*
> *Though we have no idea when they*
> *will reach Lintao.*

Li Bai's folk songs brought into Tang poetry scenes that had previously gone unnoticed: crowded taverns, thousands of men quarrying stones, the lonely aging of a river-merchant's wife. Daoist cosmology is structured on contact between all forms, appearing and dissolving, in a continuous and self-generating fabric. Therefore, any individual has the capacity to transform the order of things, but all individuals are grist for the endless transformations of the world. Embracing paradox, Li Bai writes, "When I sing, the moon will waver,/When I dance, my shadows will be scattered."

Such poetry has an analogy in classical Chinese painting: the artist masters a series of elements from nature (rocks, birds, mountains, boats, grasses, etc.) that are composed of formalized strokes. Art begins when the painter organizes the elements into a composition of his own and conveys them on paper in a fluid and uninterrupted session. The painting will not be revised; this art cannot be redone. The painting is a temporal gesture, an action that is born, lives, and dies. The artist must resolve or distill contradictions in the moment of composition. The highly prized quality of presence—execution, timing, skill, artistry—is revealed in the act itself.

Once a celebrity, Li Bai died a pauper in 762. Some 1,100 of his poems have survived. Ha Jin observes that he "produced a masterpiece in every poetic form of his time." Yet he was not keen on *lüshi*, eight-line regulated verse, then considered the apex of Chinese poetry. He felt hemmed in by its rules, which seemed to reward technical conformity over expression and spirit.

Lüshi's greatest practitioner was Du Fu, whom Li Bai met in 744 when the former was thirty-two years old. That year, Li Bai, fearing his enemies, left the emperor's service at the age of forty-three. To force "a turning point" in his life, and to protect himself (those in religious orders, according to custom, could not be pursued), he chose to undergo Daoist induction rites, a series of physical tests so punishing—including kneeling under the open sky for the greater part of seven days, with hardly any food—they sometimes proved fatal. Du Fu, who had met Li Bai just a few months earlier, stayed with him through his recovery. For nearly two weeks, they "slept in the same bed, sharing a large thin quilt, their feet entangled." Until his last years, Ha Jin writes, Du Fu "would dream of Li Bai, who had died by then, and would compose poems about him as if the light shed by Bai had never left him." Yet this friendship seemed to have left little trace on Li Bai.

Du Fu was born into an intellectually elite family, and he seemed destined for greatness. But he failed the civil service examination at least twice. Chroniclers, puzzled for a thousand years by such stumbles, have suspected that others sabotaged him. Perhaps Du Fu was too honest, too critical in his analysis of contemporary problems; no one knows. We know that he never managed to find a position that suited him and that at some point he married, loved his wife, doted on his four children, and grew poor. He was one of the rare Tang poets to make family life the subject of his poetry.

When the An Lushan Rebellion began, he became a prisoner of war. Somehow he escaped. Throughout his life, he managed to carry more than a thousand poems with him, unable to abandon his life's work even as he and his family were displaced. One of his children died from starvation. The major anthologies of the era ignored him; he died penniless and obscure, worried about his family's future. Eighty percent of his surviving work was written in the eleven years after the rebellion, and the 1,200 poems that we have from that period are believed to be only a fraction of his late work.

David Hinton's *Awakened Cosmos* focuses on the Daoist ontology undetected or unaddressed by most English translations of Du Fu's poems. The fury of the An Lushan Rebellion revealed the decay of a political order in which he, a scholar-official, felt implicated; Hinton notes that his poems combine the "despair of a Confucian loss of faith" with an "almost metaphysical sense of displacement." In nineteen essays on Daoism and translation, Hinton formulates a language to articulate "the wild"—a term he uses repeatedly to suggest that all existence is continuously transformed, and the self therein is a transient, open form.

Upright, wistful, sometimes overcome by self-pity, Du Fu wrote about fatherhood, aging, ill health, friendship, the lives of others, and a spiritual consciousness or Daoist awareness that for him was inseparable from the composition of poetry. Du Fu, observes the scholar and translator Stephen Owen in his recent translation of Du Fu's complete works, rose and fell through more social positions than any other Tang poet: "He often seems to have entirely forgotten what normally lay outside poetry's sphere of discourse."[1] He still feels immediate, as if he might be living in the next room.

The essential experience of Chinese poetry is all but untranslatable. Eliot

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[1] See Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Du Fu* (De Gruyter, 2016), which is the first and only translation into English of the complete works of Du Fu.

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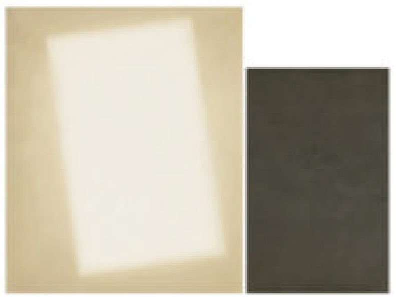

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Upcoming Auction: Fine Photographs, October 22

Fine Photographs will feature a range of work for both the new collector and the seasoned aficionado. Highlights include the deluxe edition of Manuel Álvarez Bravo's *Fotografías* (1945), with three vintage photographs; Man Ray's 1931 *Électricité* portfolio with 10 photogravures after his rayographs; Josef Koudelka's *Czechoslovakia* (1968), and Richard Misrach's *Golden Gate Bridge, 2.24.00, 6:50 AM* (2000), as well as two elegant Alma Lavenson photographs. The Estate of Evelyn Daitz, a pioneering gallerist who worked with Lee Witkin, forms a cornerstone of the auction. The offering includes Bravo's *Platinum Portfolio* (1981); the 1971 Edward Weston *Witkin-Berley* portfolio; as well as portfolios by Ruth Bernhard, Robert Doisneau, Lou Stoumen, George Tice, and Brett Weston, among others; in addition to single works by Margaret Bourke-White, Barbara Kasten, and Ralph Steiner.

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Weinberger, Lucas Klein, Burton Watson, Stephen Owen, and David Hinton, among others, have set down superb translations, while noting that, in bringing Chinese poetry into English, more things go missing than in translations from other languages. Word-for-word translations, writes François Cheng in his masterful *Chinese Poetic Writing* (1977), can give "only the barest caricature."[2] Ha Jin describes a particular Li Bai poem as obtaining a beauty that "can be fully appreciated only in the Chinese." Hinton observes that a particular line, severed from its radically different philosophical context, "fails absolutely in translation." But the incommensurability of Chinese (logographic) and English (alphabetic) written systems begins the moment a mark is made. Chinese ideograms are composed of strokes, and each of the brushstrokes references others. Cheng gives this line from Wang Wei as an example, followed by its literal translation:

> 木末芙蓉花
> branch end magnolia flowers

The character for "branch" 木 begins to transform at its tips 末 and bud into life. In the third character, 艹 (the radical for "grass" 艸 or "flower") bursts forth from the crown of the words 芙蓉 (magnolia) and ends in 花 (flower). Further, in a simultaneous layer of images, the third character, Cheng writes, "contains the element 天 'man,' which itself contains the element 人 'Man' (*homo*)," or person. "Face" 容 is visible in the fourth ideogram, and the fifth contains 化 (transformation). Thus the line also records a human trajectory: spiritual metamorphosis and then mortality embedded in nature itself.

Many simple characters can be incorporated into a single ideogram—the word, Cheng writes, "never succeeds in completely repressing other, deeper meanings ever present within the sign"—and ideograms placed beside one another generate further significance. Transference, parallels, metonymy, and correspondences across words and lines generate a radically different poetic realm than lexical meanings produce in English-language poetry (with its own rich universe of etymologies and literary associations). Each of the twenty ideograms in, for instance, a pentasyllabic quatrain, are considered independent "sages" and personalities; words are not only denotative but have their own "reality."

This is a difficult thing to wrap one's head around; the dimensionality of the Chinese writing system itself is akin to a forest we walk through (where the trees keep grouping and regrouping as we move among them), rather than a series of twigs arranged on a surface. Cheng observes that the writing system "has refused to be simply a support for the spoken language: its development has been characterized by a constant struggle to assure for itself both autonomy and freedom of combination." To add to the constellations of meaning within any given poem, the disciplines of poetry, calligraphy, and painting are not considered distinct but rather facets of a single complete art.

Hinton notes that the Chinese language is not constructed around "a center of identity"; each time we see an "I" in a translation of Tang poetry, it was almost certainly not in the original text. Chinese grammar—a genderless and verb-tense-less system in which past, present, and future are inferred by context—allows for a complex blurring of subjectivities, which is not just a side effect but a fundamental aspect of the language. In Chinese poetry, fiction, and philosophy, the "I" is not the nerve center from which thought and knowledge begin.

Hinton's austerely beautiful translations assume that Chinese classical poetry cannot be severed from philosophy. Guided by each poem, he translates and interprets Daoist concepts, refined over millennia, for which there are no precise English equivalents (just as, for example, Heidegger's "dasein" carries a web of thinking that cannot be replaced by a conventional English word). We can translate the words, but in doing so, to borrow a phrase of Cheng's, "nothing is truly translated."

'Going Up to Sun Terrace,' the only surviving calligraphy by Li Bai, 700s

Pictures from History/Bridgeman Images

Du Fu's "Spring Landscape" appears to non-Chinese readers like a block of ice, outwardly even and unified:

国破山河在
城春草木深
感时花溅泪
恨别鸟惊心
烽火连三月
家书抵万金
白头搔更短
浑欲不胜簪

The poem is an experience; it's trippy. Meaning is generated across its various planes—across couplets and images, vertically and horizontally. Hinton's translation maintains the couplets that are the basic unit of Tang poetic forms, and he creates his ice-cube shape by enjambing the lines:

The country in ruins, rivers and mountains
continue. The city grows lush with spring.

Blossoms scatter tears for us, and all these
separations in a bird's cry startle the heart.

Beacon-fires three months ablaze: by now
a mere letter's worth ten thousand in gold,

and worry's thinned my hair to such white
confusion I can't even keep this hairpin in.

In an essay that follows, Hinton notes that the opening is "possibly the most famous line in Chinese poetry" and that the poem is a sharp and unexpectedly wry observation of man-made tragedies overrun by the endless coming-into-being of the ten thousand things (all that exists, in the idiom of Chinese philosophy). Du Fu tells us that birds seem to cry for us, and blossoms weep. Of course, this is a fairy-tale view, and "in the knowledge of its falsity, heartbreaking." Du Fu's discomfiting joke at the end both overturns and accepts his fear and anxiety.

Hinton's aim is to explore the most complex ideas of Daoism—emptiness 虛 (xū), absence 無 (mó), quiet solitude 幽 (yōu), Dao appearing of itself 自然 (tzu-jan), acting without the metaphysics of self 無為 (wúwéi), and more—as expressed in Du Fu's work. In essence, he wants us to learn words again, and to momentarily set aside the philosophical assumptions of the English language. Here, for instance, is a couplet from Du Fu's "Standing Alone," containing an image of two white gulls.

Hinton begins with the Chinese original and a literal translation:

float drift attack strike convenient
laze ease go come wander

This is how he renders that couplet into idiomatic English, describing two gulls that

laze wind-drifted. Fit for an easy kill,
to and fro, they follow contentment.

Here we can glimpse some of the parallelisms visible on the image level: *float-laze, drift-ease, attack-strike*, and *go-come*. *Lüshi* poetry has strict rules governing symmetry and opposition of images and concepts, as well as tonal (the "level" and "deflected" tones of the spoken language) and rhyme patterns within lines and across couplets. Parallelism becomes, as Cheng writes, "a system turning on itself," a dialectical mode of thought that creates inner tensions subject to resolution or release.

Each of Hinton's nineteen essays is preceded by a translation of the poems he discusses and a specific philosophical term at work within it. (These translations and many others are available in Hinton's recently expanded edition of *Selected Poems of Tu Fu*.) "Standing Alone" ends with an image of frosted grass and hanging spiderwebs as the poet, a refugee fleeing with his family, awakens to the future where a "loom of origins/tangling our human ways" casts him into despair: "I stand/facing sorrow's ten thousand sources." That loom—天機 (tiānjī)—writes Hinton, stretches back to our origins, and

> to actually dwell there is to inhabit a place prior to thought and language, an inner wilds about which nothing can be said. And that is where this poem ends—a depth of dwelling in which Tu can only say that he is standing alone there. Or is he? "I" seems at first the most obvious way to fill in the empty grammatical space at the beginning of the last line.... But the subject of the penultimate line also carries over as a possible subject for the final line: "loom of origins."

With the last sentence folded in this way, the loom of origins—which continuously generates existence and into which all things will vanish—becomes the subject standing before sorrow's ten thousand sources. The "I" exists and dissolves, but not without altering the loom.

Hinton's translations have always gone against the grain. He has been building, translation by translation, an English language for a Chinese conceptual world. His versions get closest to what makes Du Fu sublime for Chinese readers. He isn't afraid to baffle us; the gaps remind us that we are only guests here, and that the poems do—indeed should—hover a bit beyond our grasp. In the twentieth century, Chinese poetry was translated into the American idiom by modernists like Ezra Pound and later poets including Kenneth Rexroth and Gary Snyder with a lightness of touch, a beguiling simplicity. Hinton is after the opposite: depth and boundlessness. Here is his translation of "Facing Snow":

Enough new ghosts to mourn any war,
and a lone old grief-sung man. Broken

clouds at twilight's ragged edge, wind
buffets a dance of frenzied snow. Ladle

beside my jar drained of emerald wine,
flame-red illusion lingers in the stove.

News comes from nowhere. I sit spirit-
wounded, trace words empty onto sky.

Hinton's unconventional study of Du Fu privileges the poems themselves, which are all scholars have ever really had to piece together the man. He observes that Du Fu, as his world collapsed, was trying to awaken language itself: "To include all of experience equally, rather than limiting it to privileged moments of lyric beauty or insight," and thus to express a "relentless realism" synonymous with consciousness itself.

The question of why Du Fu and Li Bai are still so revered is a suggestive one. Both were extremely erudite scholars with a deep respect for the poetic traditions they inherited. They were also reformers. They broke open Tang forms and invested them with more inventiveness, in more poems, than anyone had before. The mystery of their meeting adds to the intrigue. Du Fu had no doubt that Li Bai's works would last forever, and Li Bai, though less effusive, was kind to the unknown, obscure, and rather earnest Du Fu. They were both poets of genius who crisscrossed the country and experienced debilitating poverty. They were shamed by the ways their rulers abandoned the people, egotistically propelling them to war.

Is this why they've lasted? Generation after generation, their words recall the tragedies provoked by corrupted power and testify to the keen clear eye of the poet. To read them is also to live out the belief that daring writing outlasts even emperors. □

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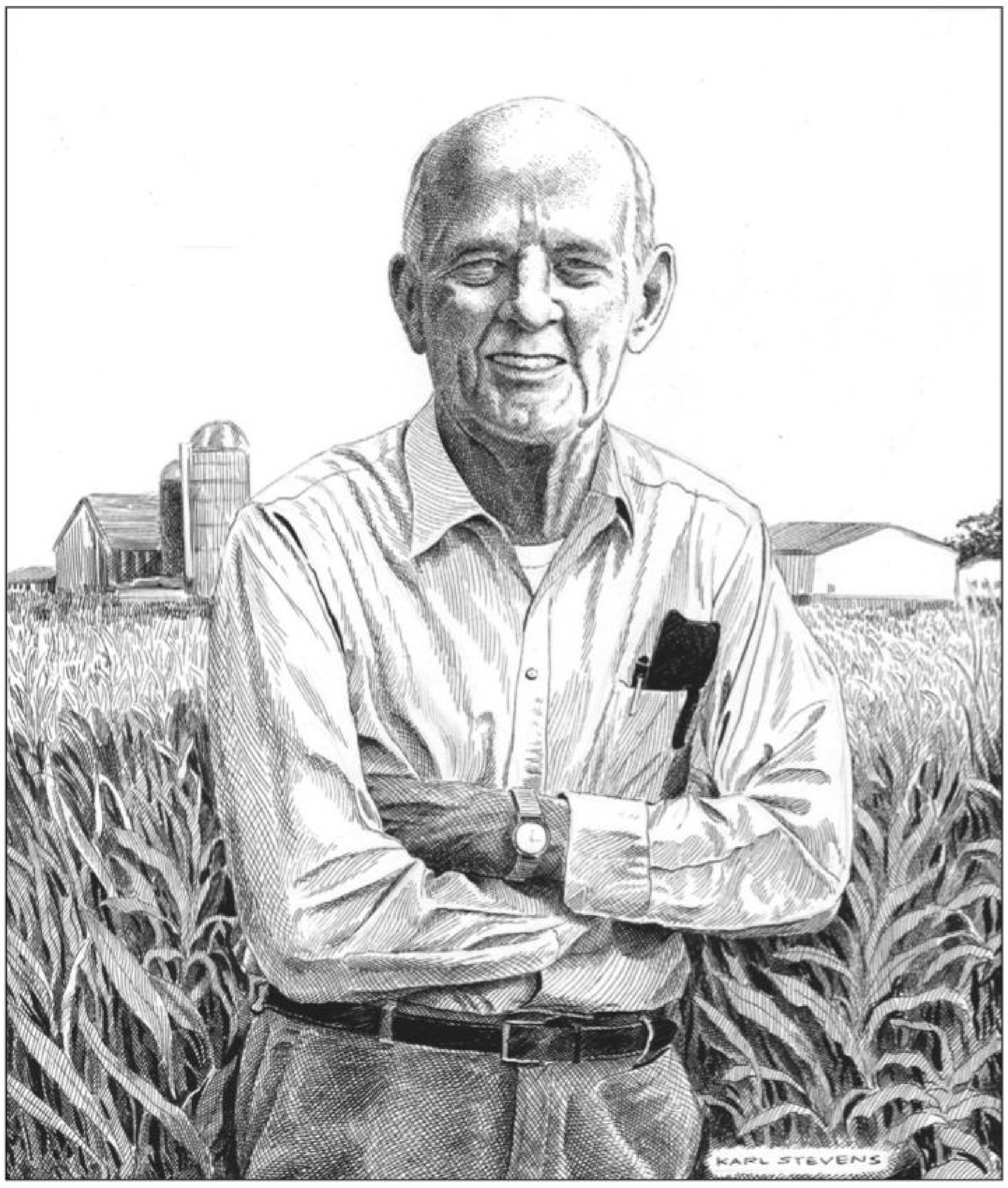
[2] Translated in 1982 by Donald A. Riggs and Jerome P. Seaton (New York Review Books, 2016).

Wendell Berry's High Horse

Verlyn Klinkenborg

What I Stand On:
The Collected Essays of
Wendell Berry, 1969–2017
by Wendell Berry.
Library of America, 2 volumes,
1,674 pp., $75.00



Wendell Berry; illustration by Karl Stevens

Not quite thirty years ago, I heard Wendell Berry give a talk at an organic farming conference in Texas. He was funny! That's what I remember. He stood behind the lectern, a tall, lean figure, and in his casual opening remarks he revealed that he was a lot slyer than he let on in print. He clearly knew how to get a laugh among farmers—always a tough crowd. But this was also an easy crowd, at least where Berry's fundamental message was concerned. Like a lot of other people that day, I'd come to hear the Berry who was decidedly *not* funny, who, at most, permitted himself now and then a small, bitter irony in one of his tough-minded essays about agriculture and the modern world. So the laughter—it rolled around the hall like thunder—came partly from surprise, naive surprise in my case. I was abruptly reminded of a basic literary principle: the writer and the writer's persona aren't the same. To the man onstage talking off the cuff, I would have gone on listening a good deal longer.

It's almost impossible to recapture how important Berry's nonfiction voice once was. It emerged from a successful career as a young novelist and poet, a career defined by familiar landmarks: a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford, a succession of teaching jobs, a Guggenheim, a Greenwich Village apartment. But in 1965, when he was thirty, Berry, his wife, Tanya, and their two children went home for good to rural Kentucky, where he had grown up surrounded by farming kin. He began to farm, adhering, with some improvements, to the old-fashioned methods he had known as a child, including farming with horses. That move gave him the footing he needed to write something new, something with a sharper edge than his often nostalgic fiction and consolatory verse: plain, pointed essays about the ways in which American farming—and America itself—was going wrong.

The land became Berry's moral center, and the early essays that emerged more or less directly from the land—gathered in *The Long-Legged House* (1969), *The Unsettling of America* (1977), and *The Gift of Good Land* (1981)—still have an unsettling power. The best of them, like "The Making of a Marginal Farm" (1980), form a kind of apologia, an account of his decision to leave the familiar career path of a prospering writer and return to farming. "The Making of a Marginal Farm" is the story of recovering a landscape burdened by bad agricultural practices and bringing it back to life. In a way, it's the least metaphorical and the least argumentative of Berry's essays. He is concerned, simply, to help us understand how he and his wife set about reclaiming the steep slopes of their small farm:

> A great deal of work is still left to do, and some of it…will take longer than we will live. But in doing these things we have begun a restoration and a healing in ourselves.

On his farm, Berry fashioned the link between social activism, conservation, agriculture, and personal well-being. In his introduction to *The Gift of Good Land*, he writes, "The discipline of farming has a low public standing." If this is no longer true, one of the reasons is Wendell Berry.

What Berry saw was that the population of this country had undergone an enormous shift in his lifetime. It had fled the countryside for the city. By the time he began writing essays about farming in the late 1960s, agriculture had become, for most Americans, an almost invisible subject, seemingly unconnected to their own lives. In his early essays, Berry showed that the damaging patterns of modern farming—its wastefulness, its reliance on machines and fossil fuels, its social destructiveness—were intrinsically connected to the damaging patterns of modern life as a whole. The vision of farming explicitly endorsed by the US Department of Agriculture was (and remains) essentially industrial rather than biological. It emphasized growth and efficiency, and it helped drive small farmers and farm laborers off the land by the millions. To go from Aldo Leopold's seminal 1939 essay, "The Farmer as a Conservationist," to Berry's book *The Unsettling of America* is to travel from a time when the fundamental values of American farming were still being contested to an early version of the agricultural dystopia in which we now live. That is the span in which Wendell Berry came of age, and which gave him his voice as an essayist.

Over the years, I've thought a lot about farming, and I've written a lot about it. I come from an extended farming family, and I care about many of the same things Berry cares about. I concur with him again and again. And yet, reading him, I could always feel my attention jibbing. Worse, I often felt an instinctive wariness, a native recoil, that grew more serious as the years went on. "What's my problem?" I'd wonder. Those feelings all came flooding back while I was working my way through *What I Stand On*,[1] the two volumes of Berry's essays recently published by the Library of America.[2]

Rereading Berry, I realized that my attention tends to wander whenever he seems to believe he deserves my full attention. That happens all the time, or so I judge from the nature of the prose. A reader can tell the difference, I think, between a writer who owes it to himself to keep writing and one who feels he owes it to the welfare of his readers. Berry can be both kinds, often at the same time. I found myself wishing he'd written far more about sheep and mules and horse-farming and the actual character of the soil and far less about sex and science and faith and the principles of Robert E. Lee.

And, rereading Berry, I realized that most of his essays aren't really essays. They're disquisitions, extended arguments. I don't often get around to agreeing or disagreeing with their author, because I'm too busy arguing with his prose. Berry derives his strength as a writer from contact with the earth, the more immediate, the better. All his life, he's been a vigilant man of conscience. He's capable of moving and inspiring readers, capable too, at times, of getting to the heart of a cultural or social problem. But he can also make you feel like you're warming yourself at a bonfire of straw men and women. All too often I'm disturbed, to the point of physical unease, by the involuted, strangely patristic way his writing and thinking move, the grandeur of his modesty.[3] He seems, to borrow a phrase from George Bernard Shaw, "too full of the validity of his remoter generalizations."

Here's an example of what I mean. Two versions of the first person—"I"—present themselves in Berry's nonfiction. One kind you can hear in this sentence from *The Unsettling of America*, his "review" of modern agriculture: "I am writing this in the north-central part of Kentucky on a morning near the end of June." It's a fresh, welcome voice, and you'd think it would be ubiquitous in the literary productions of a man as devoted to outdoor work as Berry is.

But it's not. The first person that dominates these essays is the logical first person, the "I" (and its plural "we") whose job is to fence in the argument and shepherd the sheep who are supposed to be grazing on it. This is the first person that turns up in the phrase "as I have been trying to show" or "as I am perforce aware." (That kind of "I" is all too easily replaced by the noxious "it will be observed that," which Berry uses in a passage about farming with horses.)[4] It's tempting to excuse these things by saying that the value of Berry's essays is moral, not literary. But to me that just means he often fails

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[1] *What I Stand On* is an allusion to *I'll Take My Stand*, a collection of essays published in 1930 by the Southern Agrarians, a group of writers that included Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren.

[2] This is a peculiar production. The slipcase that houses the two volumes bears the subtitle "The Collected Essays of Wendell Berry 1969–2017." But a glance at the table of contents tells you that this is a *selection* of Berry's essays. For instance, only seven of the twenty-four essays in *The Gift of Good Land* are reprinted here.

Counterpoint has been reissuing a lot of Berry's work lately, including a recent anthology, *The World-Ending Fire: The Essential Wendell Berry*, with an introduction by Paul Kingsnorth (2018). For most readers, this will be enough nonfiction Berry.

[3] A surefire antidote for this unease has been reading the work of Berry's longtime friend Gene Logsdon. He says much of what Berry says, but he says it as if he's talking directly to you instead of gazing into the middle distance.

[4] Similarly, in Berry's nonfiction, the word "then" stops referring to a point in time and becomes a bookmark of causation, referring to a location in an argument, thus: "As a writer, then, I have had this place as my fate."

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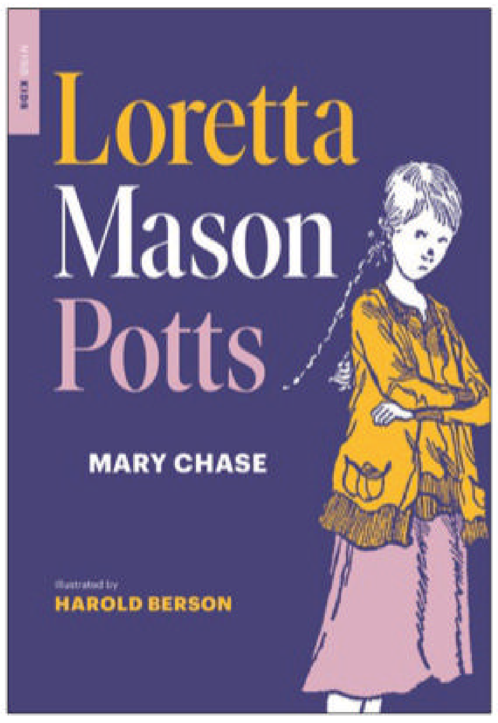
The Wall Street Journal



Imagine how shocked you would be if, like ten-year-old Colin Mason, you were the eldest and smartest kid in a family of four, and then you found out that all these years, without knowing it, you've had an older sister, Loretta Mason Potts. But this is only the first of many surprises that lie in store for Colin, as things get curiouser and curiouser very fast.

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to do the first important job of a writer—"even" a nonfiction writer—which is to make sentences that breathe with the life of the body, even when that body happens to be thinking.

In *The Long-Legged House*—a collection of essays that includes the earliest work gathered in this new anthology—Berry seems to have devoured Thoreau whole, minus a few of his less digestible tics, like his often untrackable flights of Orientalism. Thoreau may be "a man of the rarest genius," in Berry's words, but he's uneven. Some of his prose—the clearest, sharpest paragraphs of *Walden*, for instance—has been a wonderful influence on later writers, and some has been a terrible influence. Berry seems to have partaken of both. You can hear the clear echo of Concord in a passage in which he's thinking about an old, abandoned house and the way his ancestors "had trickled off into oblivion":

> And I was more grateful for the silence of their departure than I would be for the lineage of a king. Not knowing who had planted the flowers there, I did not have to weep over them, or grow reminiscent, but could enjoy them as they were. I had them free as wildflowers.

There are some familiar Thoreauvian overtones here: the slight sound of preening and the underlying suggestion that the purpose of writing prose is to allow the reader to enjoy the operation of the writer's mind. These overtones occur again and again in Berry's early nonfiction. One day, for instance, he notices a flock of wood ducks resting peacefully on the water and writes, "The moment was whole in itself, deeply satisfying both to them and to me." Generously, in a way Thoreau might approve, the writer's self-approbation spreads like a ground-fog over all of nature.

There's also a kind of skittering in *The Long-Legged House* that reminds me of Thoreau—an uncannily quick movement from local to universal and back again, as if the writer were just waiting to slip an abstraction through a gap in the hedge. You can hear a version of this in the way that Thoreau—like Berry—uses metaphor. The instantaneous fusion of resemblance and dissonance that I hope to find in a good metaphor—the suddenness of perception—isn't much use to Thoreau, because it's hard to moralize one that works that way. Every actual thing in his prose seems to quiver with the desire to become metaphorical or symbolic, like the dead horse in *Walden* whose strong scent causes Thoreau to think of the myriads of creatures squashed and gobbled and "run over in the road," ending in a vision of "universal innocence." It's a relief when things remain merely themselves.

Something similar happens in *The Long-Legged House*. Berry tells the story of a raccoon hunter who threw away his lantern in order to see better in the dark. Then comes this:

> For I have turned aside from much that I knew, and have given up much that went before. What will not bring me, more certainly than before, to where I am is of no use to me. I have stepped out of the clearing into the woods. I have thrown away my lantern, and I can see the dark.

The lantern has been transmogrified in a way that leaves the reader puzzled, as does the phrasing of the sentence that begins "What will not bring me." Berry says elsewhere that he's "never been comfortable behind" a pulpit. But this habit of extemporaneous symbolizing—so similar to extemporaneous moralizing—is surely a pulpit habit, and it's one that he will pursue.

The differences between Thoreau and Berry begin to sharpen soon after *The Long-Legged House*, and they're instructive. Intellectually, Thoreau isn't a system-builder. He's a noticer, wedded to the particular, no matter how it distracts him from any larger purpose. By the time Berry's nonfiction prose reaches full stride, in *The Unsettling of America*, his urge to explain, to persuade, and to resonate has turned him into a very different kind of writer. He has begun to construct a systematic, philosophical edifice on an analogical foundation, a structure erected to the sound of one man thinking as deliberately as he can, trying "to slow language down and make it thoughtful."

I'm eager to understand just why Berry's essays pursue the methods they do, but he has little to say about it. In "The Burden of the Gospels" (2005), he says, "I expect any writing to make literal sense before making sense of any other kind." Fair enough. But that tells me less about his method—why he sounds the way he does—than this peculiar sentence from "Standing By Words" (1983): "In public writing, and in speech passing between strangers, there may only be degrees of generalization." Berry's essays are indeed public writing and, having been published in books and magazines, they are also a form of speech passing between strangers. But does that really explain the extraordinarily high degree of abstraction and generalization in his prose?

Perhaps the best explanation comes in his afterword to the third edition of *The Unsettling of America*:

> Another reason my book has received no vigorous counterargument, I fear, is that in centers of learning and power argument itself has become virtually obsolete, a lost art. Public discourse of all kinds now tends to pattern itself either upon the arts of advertisement and propaganda (that is, the arts of persuasion without argument, which lead to reasonless and even unconscious acquiescence) or upon the allegedly objective or value-free demonstrations of science.

This is shifty stuff. It seems to leave Berry standing alone with his book and argument, the last debater, mourning the death of civilization and logical dueling. What it really does is add another straw man to the fire. He sounds perilously close to saying, "I see nothing that I choose to recognize as argument." In Berry's eyes, this isn't merely an institutional failure, it's also a betrayal of something much larger, "for," as he says, "the pursuit of truth by argument and counterargument is a major part of our cultural tradition from the gospels and the Platonic dialogues to every county courthouse today."

The word that's missing in that passage is "evidence," a pretty important word in county courthouses and a word whose absence offers a valuable clue to how Berry's nonfiction often works. For in his essays he assumes, again and again, that *he* will supply the argument and *we* will supply the evidence—the evidence of our own hollow lives, our degenerate bodies, our feelings of dislocation and spiritual bankruptcy. It's surprising, in fact, how little teaching, as opposed to lecturing, you find in these two volumes, how little you can learn about the workings of the actual world. Berry has said that "the discipline of thought is not generalization; it is detail." But for the most part you won't find this borne out in his essays. His prose relishes abstraction.

In *The Unsettling of America*, for example, there's a long passage about soil. It's a moment when, with a little effort, Berry might have given us a *sotto in su* perspective—a glimpse of the world above from the worm's eye below. He might have taught us a little about the microbial and mineral contents of the soil, its extraordinary biological complexity, its fragility and resilience—the actual gritty stuff right under his feet—all of which would have served his argument well. But Berry is on the trail of a metaphor. "We see," he writes,

> that we have not only a description of the fundamental biological process, but also a metaphor of great beauty and power. It is impossible to contemplate the life of the soil for very long without seeing it as analogous to the life of the spirit.

When I contemplate the life of the soil, I come nowhere near "the life of the spirit." I never think of it. I see the incredible richness of biological existence, of which I'm wholly a part. But Berry's reader, in this case me, is overridden by the peremptory phrase "it is impossible to contemplate," which, as a form of argument, is no argument at all.

Just how open Berry is to argument and counterargument became clear in 1988, when several readers complained about his now infamous essay "Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer," which was reprinted by *Harper's* in its September issue.[5] The trouble arose with this line: "My wife types my work on a Royal standard typewriter bought new in 1956 and as good now as it was then." Not surprisingly, some readers complained about a man who refused to buy a (possibly) labor-saving device while relying on the labor of his wife. And, not surprisingly, some readers complained in ways that were foolish and thoughtless.

To me, the real trouble begins a little lower down in the paragraph, when Berry says, "We have, I think, a literary cottage industry that works well and pleasantly. I do not see anything wrong with it." He may be right about the pleasant cottage industry. I don't know, and in any case that's between him and his wife. It's the next sentence that sticks in my craw: "I do not see anything wrong with it." Berry attacks many men in the pages of his essays—Buckminster Fuller, Earl Butz, who was head of the USDA under Nixon and Ford (and surely deserves vilification as a racist and a diehard exponent of industrialized agriculture), and a host of lesser "specialists" and "experts." I can imagine each of them saying simply, and in the same tone of voice, "I do not see anything wrong with it." And expecting to get away with it.

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[5] Counterpoint will reissue this essay in a slim volume in 2021.

Harper's published five letters from critical readers as well as Berry's response to them. It reads like an exercise in pique. He belittles the letter-writers and claims that they believe in a "technological fundamentalism that... wishes to monopolize a whole society and, therefore, cannot tolerate the smallest difference of opinion." He concludes his argument by saying, "it seems to me that none of my correspondents recognizes the innovativeness of my essay. If the use of a computer is a new idea, then a newer idea is not to use one."

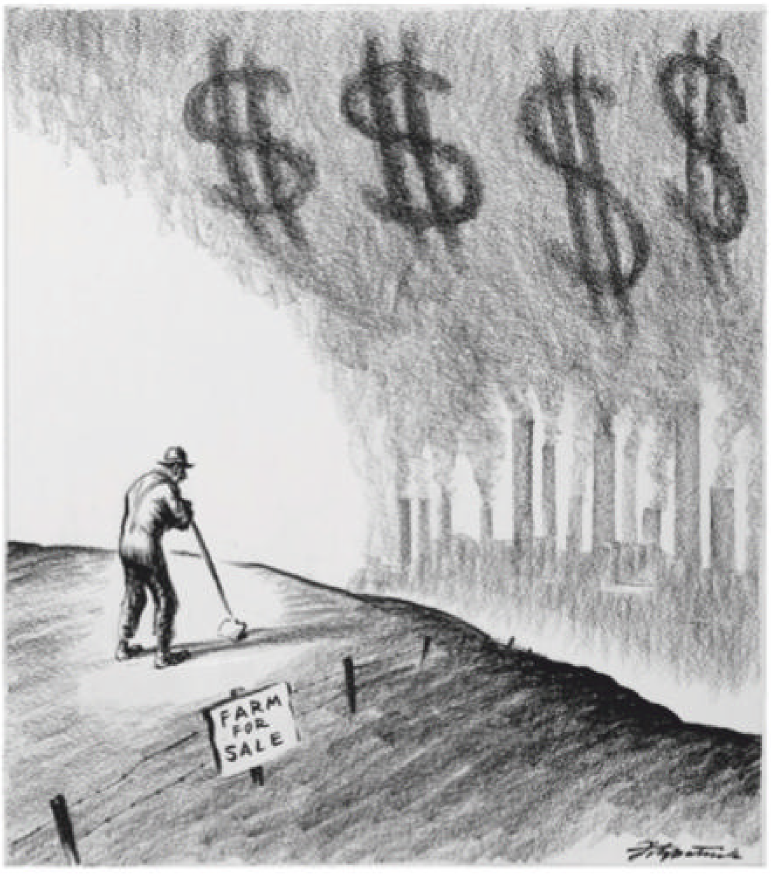
Perhaps that's meant to be what Berry calls, accusing himself of it elsewhere, a bit of "smartassery." But it's hard to tell, because it sounds like the kind of conclusion he's usually in the business of reaching. To me, Berry's response suggests a failure of imagination and empathy—twin aspects of the same state of mind. The problem isn't that he couldn't see anything wrong with having his wife type his work. It's that he couldn't imagine anything wrong with it. Nor could he imagine anyone else seeing anything wrong with it.

Again and again, you come across moments in Berry's essays where logic overrides empathy, where conviction overrides imagination, where the pursuit of a single truth overrides the possibility of other truths. Here is one such moment. In *The Unsettling of America*, Berry writes, "An infertile woman and an infertile field both receive a dose of chemicals... and are thus equally reduced to the status of productive machines." You can feel in this sentence how seductive the power of analogy is to a man building an argument—it is brick and mortar both. But there's a person in this sentence—a woman—and she and her sense of herself have been left entirely out of his account.

Berry can imagine the woman being reduced to the status of a machine, though syntactically and analogically he's the one doing the reducing. But he won't pause to imagine what she thinks or feels about fertility or the autonomy of her body. What he's interested in is making his point, which is this: "For the care or control of fertility...we have allowed a technology of chemicals and devices to replace entirely the cultural means of ceremonial forms, disciplines, and restraints." What I see here is a lapse of historical imagination—a failure to recognize that these "cultural means" have not only been inadequate, they have been oppressive.

"Forms, disciplines, and restraints": these are the kinds of abstractions and generalizations that crowd Wendell Berry's work. Berry uses these words in an almost talismanic way, but without much specificity, as you can tell when you begin to ask a few questions. Who establishes these forms? Who imposes these restraints? Who administers these disciplines? Berry's answer is "the community"—as in, "without the community disciplines that make for a stable, neighborly population, the cities have become scenes of poverty, boredom, and disease." Berry asks us to trust him when he talks about things like "community disciplines." I balk at that.

At the root of his quiet radicalism, Berry is a champion of what he calls "established forms," which is one of the reasons he always prefers the word "Creation" to "nature." Like so many of the moral abstractions in these essays, "community disciplines" is a container into which anything can be poured—into which, historically, everything *has* been poured, to the peril of those not imposing the disciplines.[6] Berry's prose seems to suggest that there can be no question about the nature of community or whom it includes if it includes men of goodwill like him. The inadequacy of this in America at this moment should be obvious.



State Historical Society of Missouri

Illustration by Daniel Robert Fitzpatrick, 1928

A cottage industry of Wendell Berry quotations seems to have sprung up in the past few years. I see them everywhere, on office walls, in yoga studios, in church basements. And the strange thing is that Berry's conclusions—often quite quotable—are often more persuasive than the means he uses to reach them. For example: "The preserver of abundance is excellence." Or: "To live at the expense of the source of life is obviously suicidal." Or this: "The time is past when it was enough merely to elect our officials. We will have to elect them and then go and *watch* them and keep our hands on them, the way the coal companies do."

Berry is often regarded as a prophet, and it's our collective tragedy that his prophecy has been fulfilled. Agriculture across the planet has been industrialized—Americanized—with social and ecological consequences on a scale that even Berry, I think, didn't imagine. We live now in a world where agriculture is completely dependent on the consumption of fossil fuels, where, as Berry says, "we need petroleum exactly as much as we need food and must have it *before* we can eat." Agriculture, instead of being what it naturally should be—a vast carbon sink and thus a solution to climate change—is one of the leading climate offenders. With all of this has come a linked decline in biological and social complexity that is appalling.

It's tempting to look at these changes as though they're almost a natural, if unfortunate, evolution of sorts. Berry has never made that mistake, and the force of his most potent essays from the 1970s and early 1980s arose from the fact that he refused to let his readers make it. He kept turning over words like "progress" and "efficiency" until we saw the corruption they hid. In the Darwinian economy of nature, humans do not make the rules. But when it comes to the Darwinism of markets—the Darwinism of economic assumptions—we do make the rules, and, as Berry reminds us, they have been skewed against life itself.

In England in the fall of 1830 there were riots in the countryside, caused in part by fifteen years of serious agricultural depression. Farm laborers burned barns and hay-ricks and threshing machines in the night. Their leader was a fictional creation named Captain Swing. One of the great reforming essayists of the time—the Reverend Sydney Smith, a clergyman-farmer and a man of extraordinary moral courage—wrote a public letter to Mr. Swing, which was published in 1830. The logic of what he said is nearly unassailable. "If you begin to object to machinery in farming," Smith wrote,

> you may as well object to a plow, because it employs fewer men than a spade. You may object to a harrow, because it employs fewer men than a rake. You may object even to a spade, because it employs fewer men than fingers and sticks, with which savages scratch the ground in Otaheite [Tahiti].

As far as it goes, Smith's argument is right. But he'd never seen a half-million-dollar combine or an automated hog-confinement system. It had never occurred to him that farming could be structured around the welfare of machines, not humans (or animals), to the benefit of multinational corporations and the destruction of local towns and the soil itself. As for the ecological destruction that mass industrial farming has brought and is bringing about on this planet, I can't even imagine how one would explain it to him.

Wendell Berry's most important contribution to American discourse may turn out to be the decision he made in 1965 to return to Henry County, Kentucky, and farm with horses where his family had farmed. He is one of the great stayers—the greatest, perhaps—in American agriculture, which has been a slash-and-burn affair from the start. His choice said—and still says—that in the progression from rake to spade to plow to half-million-dollar combine, we get to decide where to stop, where to find the balance between nature and our needs. Berry chose to become, in a sense, the control in a one-sided experiment. He'd farm the way that he would farm, the rest of the world would farm the way that it would farm, and a few decades hence we'd compare the two. We know the result. ☐

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[6] A little more Berry on "community": "A healthy community is a form that includes all the local things that are connected by the larger, ultimately mysterious form of the Creation."

THE Reader's CATALOG
The New York Review of Books

EDWARD GOREY
HOLIDAY CARDS

GERTRUDE STEIN AS A CHILD HOLIDAY CARDS

Like all of the wildly imaginative art of Edward Gorey, this drawing, entitled "Gertrude Stein as a child decorates a dog for Christmas," seems more truthful than reality. Archival photographs of Gertrude Stein as a child of three—long curls, big hair bow, frilly pinafore, and earrings no less—seem to miss something elemental. Leave it to Edward Gorey to get it right. Not only Gertrude's portrait, but her interest; long before she was decorating the walls at 27, rue de Fleurus, she was decorating her dog for the holidays.

The drawing was published in 1975 as a card in a limited edition edition of 400, to be used as a holiday greeting "for the artist and publisher", Albondocani Press. None were for sale. Established in 1968, active into the mid-nineties, and revived in the early 2000s, Albondocani published postcards, novels, poetry books, and reprints of classics. Its publisher, George Bixby, was known for his devotion to writers, who included Stein, Marianne Moore, Saul Bellow, E. M. Forster, and others. Fortunately, this rare card has been brought back into print by the Edward Gorey Estate.

A B

EDWARD GOREY TINSEL DANCE HOLIDAY CARDS

"Ettie Lou Stooper does a tinsel dance at a tree-trimming party in Gumsville, Nebraska, Christmas Eve, 1923" is the caption on this very Gorey holiday card. The card was originally published in 1981 in a limited edition of 450 copies by Albondocani Press. Fortunately, the Gorey Estate has reissued this card. It's up to you to bring back the tinsel dance. (A)

EDWARD GOREY CHRISTMAS AT HUGGLEBEE POND HOLIDAY CARDS

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Because It’s Still There

Joshua Hammer

The World Beneath Their Feet:
Mountaineering, Madness,
and the Deadly Race
to Summit the Himalayas
by Scott Ellsworth.
Little, Brown, 393 pp.,
$30.00; $18.99 (paper)

On the morning of May 22, 2019, Nirmal Purja, a Nepalese former officer in the British special forces, was making his way down from the 29,029-foot summit of Mount Everest when he took a photograph that was soon disseminated around the world. It showed one hundred people in colorful parkas inching along the summit ridge, lined up as if waiting to board a ski lift at Lake Tahoe. Purja spent seven hours trapped in the “death zone” above 26,000 feet, where there is not enough oxygen for most humans to breathe, requiring them to carry supplemental oxygen in tanks and breathe through masks. He descended along a single fixed rope past a horde of exhausted, freezing climbers on their way up.

The scene Purja captured was the result, in part, of a freak cyclone in the Bay of Bengal that enveloped the high Himalayas in snow and wind for many days and limited the good weather atop Everest to a single forty-eight-hour period. “Everyone was trying to get through this weather window,” the veteran Himalayan mountaineer told me. “Nobody wanted to miss the opportunity.” But the row of climbers also reflected what climbing Mount Everest has increasingly become: a big business. In 1997 John Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air* portrayed the Everest quest as an overcommercialized industry, populated by too many showboating guides and wealthy dilettantes, and plagued by overcrowding, negligence, and unnecessary risk-taking. Since then the slopes have grown even more densely packed and dangerous. Last year Nepal sold 381 permits, the most ever, at $11,000 each, earning $4 million for the impoverished government. The Chinese distributed more than a hundred permits for the northern side. (Hundreds of Sherpas join the expeditions as guides and porters and don’t require permits to climb.) According to one Himalayan database, the number of people who have reached the summit of Everest has nearly doubled since 2010.

A proliferation of climbing agencies, meanwhile, has made it easier than ever to mount an Everest expedition. Sherpa sources in Nepal told me that more than one hundred local companies now offer guided trips up the mountain. (Dozens of European and American companies also organize Himalayan expeditions.) Some of these are bare-bones operations that require little proof of technical skill, experience, or physical fitness. This unregulated free-for-all was partly responsible last year for one of the deadliest seasons on Everest in decades. Eleven people died in May 2019, including seven between May 22 and May 24. Reinhard Grubhofer, a veteran Austrian climber who reached the summit on May 23, found himself trapped for an hour in a bottleneck created by a novice who froze in fear before a vertical rock face and had to be coaxed down the mountain by her Sherpa guides. Everest, he told me, was becoming the provenance of “dead people and tourists.”

Mountaineering purists have also decried what they call “the Everest circus,” describing it as a garish arena for self-promoters and hucksters. In 2017 the British DJ Paul Oakenfold hosted the “highest party on earth” at the Everest base camp in Nepal, blasting electronic dance music at 17,600 feet to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the “Second Summer of Love” on the island of Ibiza. Then there were the Indian climbers last year who claimed to have reached the summit and were treated like heroes back in their hometown—only to be exposed as fraudsters who gave up at 23,000 feet.

Climbers approaching the summit of Mount Everest, 2010

Pemba Dorje Sherpa/AFP/Getty Images

Disregard for the environment has turned the climb from a pristine experience into a polluted one. A forty-five-day expedition in 2019 to clean up the “world’s highest garbage dump,” as some have called it, retrieved twelve tons of trash, including, according to a Nepalese military spokesman, “empty oxygen cylinders, plastic bottles, cans, batteries, food wrappings, fecal matter and kitchen waste”—as well as two human corpses. Last year, under pressure to reduce the crowds, fatalities, and damage to the mountain, the Nepalese government tightened the permit rules. It will now require applicants to be accompanied by a trained Nepalese guide, and to show proof of both good health and experience scaling at least one 6,500-meter (21,325-foot) peak.

Climbing Mount Everest was a different undertaking altogether back in 1934, when an eccentric British World War I hero named Maurice Wilson set out to ascend the world’s highest mountain. A devotee of fasting and Eastern religions, and a fervent believer in building character through self-denial and physical hardship, Wilson decided to undertake the challenge completely on his own. He learned to fly a single-engine, open cockpit de Havilland Gipsy Moth, which he named *Ever Wrest*, and announced his intention to fly solo to the Himalayas. Fleet Street derided him as a lunatic and a fool. His Majesty’s Government, worried that Wilson’s plan to overfly self-isolated Nepal would touch off a diplomatic incident, ordered him to call it off.

Wilson blazed ahead anyway. Armed with crude maps and hopscotching from Munich to the Tunisian town of Bizerte to Bahrain, he ended his five-thousand-mile journey in Darjeeling, an Indian retreat in the Himalayan foothills. From there, disguised as a Tibetan monk and joined by three Sherpa guides, he trekked for a month across the bleak Tibetan plateau. In mid-April he arrived at the 16,000-foot-high Rongbuk Monastery at the foot of Everest, where he received a blessing from the head lama. On April 16, 1934, carrying a forty-five-pound backpack filled with a tent, two stoves, a camera, a few days’ worth of food, a sleeping bag, and a pennant signed by well-wishers in London, he left his Sherpas and set out alone for the summit.

He quickly came face-to-face with Everest’s harsh realities: he lost his way in a maze of ice pinnacles, wandered into cul-de-sacs, became pinned down in a blizzard, sprained an ankle, and ran out of food. He managed to hobble back to the monastery, rested for two and a half weeks, and then started afresh. “Off again, gorgeous day,” he wrote in his diary on the morning of May 31, 1934, before venturing off to surmount a near-vertical ice chimney in a strengthening wind. Those were the last words he wrote. One year later, a member of a British reconnaissance expedition found Wilson’s frozen corpse lying below the 23,000-foot North Col, a sharp-edged pass connecting Everest and Mount Changtse in Tibet. Back in England, Wilson was posthumously ridiculed in some quarters and glorified in others. “It wasn’t mountaineering,” proclaimed Frank Smythe, one of the era’s leading Himalayan climbers, “yet it was magnificent.”

Wilson’s doomed journey is a fitting centerpiece for *The World Beneath Their Feet: Mountaineering, Madness, and the Deadly Race to Summit the Himalayas*, Scott Ellsworth’s often thrilling though sometimes episodic and repetitive account of the extraordinary athletes, daredevils, visionaries, and fools who joined in the competition to scale the world’s highest peaks between the 1930s and the mid-1950s. (All of them were male; the first woman to reach the summit of Everest, Junko Tabei, didn’t accomplish the feat until 1975.) It was a time when Mount Everest and other Himalayan giants—Nanga Parbat, K2, Kanchenjunga, Annapurna—remained uncharted territory, when the alpine equipment that mountaineers now take for granted, such as ice axes, pitons, carabiners, and oxygen canisters, was just beginning to be used. Looming in the background were the roiling geopolitics of the era—the rise of Nazi Germany, Japanese aggression in China, the Indian independence movement. Underlying the whole enterprise was a pioneering spirit now lost in our almost fully explored world—the recognition that scaling Himalayan peaks, like the race for the North and South Poles two decades earlier, stood as the ultimate test of courage and endurance.

Nobody captured that spirit more than George Mallory, “a vibrant, pulsating life force,” as Ellsworth describes him, whose repeated attempts to conquer Everest in the early 1920s transfixed a country desperately seeking heroes after the carnage and disillusionment of the Great War. (It was Mallory who, when asked why he was so determined to climb Everest, supposedly replied with the three most famous words in mountaineering lore: “Because it’s there.”) “Mon dieu!” Lytton Strachey gushed about the athlete and would-be intellectual who fraternized with the Bloomsbury Set and spent part of each year as a lecturer at Cambridge. “He’s six foot high, with the body of an athlete by Praxiteles, and a face—oh incredible—the mystery of Botticelli, the refinement and delicacy of a Chinese print, the youth and piquancy of an unimaginable English boy.” In 1924, on his third attempt, Mallory disappeared along with his climbing partner Sandy Irvine while ascending above 26,000 feet on the northeast ridge, setting off a period of national mourning and new resolve among British mountaineers to resume his quest.

That effort picked up momentum in 1931 with a gathering at the Alpine Club in London. Its members, almost all of them from Britain’s upper class, were bound by money, education, a lust for climbing, and worship of fallen heroes of the British Empire such as George Gordon, killed by the Mahdi’s soldiers in Khartoum, and the polar explorer Robert Falcon Scott. Now Mallory had been added to the rolls. “Many members of the Alpine Club found the mountains to be an intoxicant like no other,” writes Ellsworth, “a place where every facet of one’s being—physical, mental and spiritual—was stretched to the limit.” Several of them had died testing their courage and skill on technically difficult ascents of the Matterhorn, Mont Blanc, and the most challenging peaks of the Caucasus. As Ellsworth explains it:

> Once you had [overcome] the terror that kept your feet and hands from moving along an ice-pocked ridge hundreds of yards above what could easily become your very own rock-strewn grave, or surviv[ed] a whiteout blizzard at 14,000 feet—you were changed forever. And when the climbing years were done, you rekindled those feelings with other members of your tribe over *truite meunière*, *pommes parisienne*, and bottles of Pouilly-Fuissé at the annual Alpine Club dinners.

The 1933 Everest expedition, organized by the club, was the most expensive and best-equipped mountaineering campaign of its era. It captured the imagination of millions of Britons—including George V, who sent a check for £100—and became a symbol of the British Empire's power, wealth, and global reach. Ellsworth recounts this trip in marvelous detail. Organizers packed twenty-one-and-a-half tons of supplies—lightweight tents, bespoke leather boots, and windproof suits of tightly woven cotton gabardine, along with tins of sardines, Ovaltine, Heinz beans, delicacies from Fortnum & Mason, and several cases of Johnnie Walker whiskey—into more than 1,100 crates and shipped them halfway around the world to Calcutta.

The twelve-member team included some of Britain's greatest mountaineers, among them a twenty-five-year-old prodigy named Eric Shipton. The orphaned son of a tea planter, Shipton, after a troubled childhood, had mastered rock climbing in the French Alps and later won the admiration of his peers for his solo ascents of Mount Kenya and Uganda's Ruwenzoris. Shipton and his comrades followed Mallory's route, approaching from Tibet and climbing up the north side of the mountain. (Nepal remained closed to outsiders.) After they established a camp at 27,000 feet—six hundred feet above Mallory's highest camp—an initial two-man team failed to reach the summit. Then Shipton and Frank Smythe made a final try. But blizzards, snow-filled deep gullies, or couloirs, vertical ice cliffs, raging winds, bitter cold, and food shortages proved too much for them. The pair turned back a few hundred yards short.

Shipton became a near-ubiquitous presence on Great Britain's Himalayan expeditions during the 1930s. He led or participated in two more unsuccessful attempts to reach Everest's summit—far more scaled-down affairs than the 1933 extravaganza, reflecting his spartan approach to climbing, and, his critics would charge, his lack of ultracompetitive zeal. Yet the expedition that thrilled Britons most, writes Ellsworth, was Shipton's attempt to climb one of Hinduism's most sacred mountains, the 25,000-foot Nanda Devi—roughly translated as "Goddess of Bliss." To do so required entering the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, a real-life version of Shangri-La, the Edenic enclave invented by the novelist James Hilton in his 1934 best seller *Lost Horizon*. Glimpsed by a legendary British climber, Tom Longstaff, from a 19,000-foot Himalayan pass, the sanctuary was "a pristine, two hundred and fifty-square-mile amphitheater, a circular valley of grass and flowers, birds and mammals, that was completely cut off from the rest of the world." The only way to reach it was through the Rishi Nala, a seemingly impenetrable gorge formed by the raging Rishi Ganga River and hemmed in by near-vertical rock walls. Ellsworth's step-by-step account of the weeks-long attempt by Shipton, his partner Bill Tilman, and three Sherpas to pass through the Rishi Nala—"along the narrowest of ledges, through the bone-chilling river, and across riotous heaps of uneven slab"—is one of the most thrilling sections of his book.

Great Britain was not the only nation to throw itself into the Himalayan quest during the years before World War II. The United States joined the race in the mid-1930s, dispatching several teams of world-class climbers on missions to scale the Minya Konka, the highest mountain in China's Sichuan province; Mount Everest; and Pakistan's K2, at 28,251 feet the world's second-highest peak. Among them were colorful characters such as Paul Petzoldt, an Iowa farm boy turned hobo turned Grand Teton guide who discussed mountaineering with Edward, the Prince of Wales, at Windsor Castle, dined with Fred Astaire, and joined America's first K2 summit attempt. Switzerland, France, Italy, and Russia also mounted ambitious expeditions. Many of these journeys—an overwhelming accumulation of names, places, and physical and mental trials in high-altitude hell—blur together in Ellsworth's telling. But his evocations of the era, when simply journeying to staging areas through unstable corners of Asia could be a perilous adventure, are superb: one American team set off from Shanghai in 1932 just as a Japanese destroyer began shelling the Chinese quarter, and others contended with anti-British protests and riots in Srinagar and other Indian cities.

The most serious rival to Great Britain was Germany. Unlike the British, who had nothing higher within their borders to hone their skills than a 4,400-foot hill in Scotland called Ben Nevis, the Germans had the Bavarian Alps, "rising like a Wagnerian stage set," as Ellsworth puts it, two hours by train south of Munich. Ellsworth describes the surge of enthusiasm for mountaineering in the 1920s, when a new generation of outdoor lovers, seeking solace and purpose after the shattering defeat of the Great War, turned to the mountains en masse:

> You could find it in the standing-room-only mountain huts in the Tyrol, where, on weekends and summer weekdays, thousands of novice mountaineers spread out their sleeping bags. You could hear it [in] the jangle of early gear racks and the crunch of boots on sun-hardened snow. You could see it in the corner movie houses in Berlin and Frankfurt, where a new kind of motion picture, the *Bergfilm*, awed audiences with stunning, on-location mountain scenery and the fresh new faces of the actors—including a sultry, twenty-four-year-old former dancer named Leni Riefenstahl. And you could find it in the growing membership rolls of climbing and hiking clubs. Unlike the Alpine Club in Great Britain, whose membership rarely rose [to] more than a couple of hundred, the Deutscher und Österreichischer Alpenverein boasted more than two hundred *thousand* members.

A more ominous movement was also on the rise during this period, and the pursuit of mountaineering excellence neatly fit the Nazis' dream of establishing the superiority of the master race. The link between the two was a Great War veteran named Paul Bauer. Injured at Ypres and captured by the British after the Battle of the Somme, Bauer returned home, aimless and embittered, to a small town in Bavaria in 1919. He drifted to Munich, enrolled in university, joined a proto-Nazi paramilitary group called the Freikorps, and began exploring the German and Austrian Alps. Bauer saw mountaineering as a way for Germany to reclaim the greatness stolen from it by the Treaty of Versailles. He led expeditions in the early 1930s to the Caucasus and then, as the Nazis rose to power, the Himalayas, laying out a *Lebensraum* doctrine for the alpine set. "As a result of the war and the bitter aftermath, an unusually determined . . . generation had arisen in Germany," he wrote. "We felt an obligation to penetrate beyond the narrow confines of our native land."

Ellsworth captures the sinister atmosphere of 1930s Munich, the heartland of both the Nazi Party and the burgeoning mountaineering industry. Swastika-bedecked rallies, book burnings, vandalism of newspapers, harassment of Jews, and concentration camps became commonplace, and Bauer was a true believer. He led the initial Himalayan expedition up near the summit of Kanchenjunga in 1931 and spurred other climbers to follow him. One was Willy Merkl, who led the first attempted ascent of Nanga Parbat, the farthest west of the fourteen *Achttausenders*—the Himalayas' eight-thousand-meter-plus peaks—a formidable mountain, writes Ellsworth, "with soaring ridgelines, impossibly steep cliffs, and monstrous walls of ice and snow." That expedition ended with the harrowing deaths in whiteout conditions of Merkl, two other German climbers, and six Sherpas. A second attempt at Nanga Parbat three years later also ended tragically, with the deaths of sixteen climbers in an avalanche.

Bauer was a clever propagandist who kept a focus on international outreach even as the Nazis' crimes began to appall the world. To retain the cooperation of the British officials who controlled access to the Himalayas through India, he ingeniously set up a front organization, the Munich-based Deutsche Himalaya Foundation. Images of swastikas were banned from its letterhead, and its deep ties to the Nazi Party were downplayed. Bauer's ventures earned the support of Nazis such as Heinrich Himmler, who backed a crackpot expedition to Tibet in 1938 to search for remnants of the original Aryan race.

Bauer was abetted by the foundation's second-in-command, a smooth-talking Nazi alpinist named Peter Aufschnaiter, who won over British diplomats as late as 1939 for a Nanga Parbat expedition. But the German-British rivalry for

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BRIAN DILLON
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Himalayan supremacy came to an abrupt halt with the outbreak of war. Aufschnaiter and an SS officer named Heinrich Harrer returned to Karachi from Nanga Parbat and were promptly arrested by Indian colonial police. Both men spent the next five years in a prisoner-of-war camp in Dehra Dun, India, escaping in 1944 and making their way on foot to Lhasa. Their story was retold in Jean-Jacques Annaud's 1997 film *Seven Years in Tibet*, starring Brad Pitt as Harrer and David Thewlis as Aufschnaiter.

The last section of Ellsworth's book grippingly recreates the conquest of Everest in May 1953 by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. This story has been told many times before, including in Hillary's own memoir, but Ellsworth provides new background and a reminder that their achievement was the culmination of decades of laborious progress and geopolitical twists and turns. After the Chinese Communists defeated the Kuomintang in 1949 and took over Tibet, Western climbers abruptly lost access to the northern side of Mount Everest. But hermetic Nepal had just began to crack open, and a series of reconnaissance missions on the unknown southern side, including one led by Eric Shipton, mapped out a promising route to the summit via the Khumbu Icefall, "a daunting maze of broken seracs," or ice pinnacles, Ellsworth writes, "some of them the size of ocean-going ships."

Shipton was initially the favorite to lead the 1953 expedition. But the Joint Himalayan Committee, a successor to the Alpine Club, became convinced that the introspective Shipton lacked fire. "It would need a fanatic to get up Everest—and Shipton was in no sense a fanatic," one member explained. The organizers instead chose an aggressive army officer named John Hunt, who began assembling a team. Hillary—the rough-hewn son of an Auckland beekeeper, who had discovered mountaineering on the South Island of his native New Zealand and had participated with Shipton in a 1951 reconnaissance trip—received an invitation. So did Tenzing, a son of impoverished Tibetan refugees in Nepal, who had become a highly trusted veteran of three Everest expeditions, coming close to the top on a 1952 Swiss attempt. The strapping New Zealander and the diminutive Sherpa formed a powerful bond. "I suppose we made a funny-looking pair, he and I, with Hillary about six feet three inches tall and myself some seven inches shorter," Tenzing recalled. "What was important was that, as we climbed together and became used to each other, we were becoming a strong and confident team."

On May 28, 1953, Hillary and Tenzing pushed up the southeast ridge high above the Khumbu Icefall until, their energy depleted, they found a ledge at 27,900 feet big enough to pitch a tent. They set out at four o'clock the next morning, the temperature –16 Fahrenheit, breathing bottled oxygen while ascending a ridge with three-thousand-foot drops on both sides. Then, at about 28,700 feet, they reached the final obstacle: a fifty-foot rock wall, seemingly unascendable, that would later become known as the Hillary Step. "But as they approached the far right edge of the wall," Ellsworth recounts,

> Hillary noticed something, in the form of a large cornice, that gave him an idea. "This cornice, in preparation for its inevitable crash down the mountainside, had started to lose its grip on the rock," he wrote, "and a long narrow vertical crack had been formed between the rock and the ice. The crack was large enough to take the human frame, and though it offered little security, it was at least a route. I quickly made up my mind—Tenzing had an excellent belay and we must be near the top—it was worth a try."

Hillary, followed by Tenzing, squeezed up the gap, then ascended the final slope. At 11:30 on that clear Friday morning, the two men stood atop Mount Everest. They snapped pictures and buried a pencil from Tenzing's daughter, a crucifix, and a small black cloth cat that Hunt had given to Hillary as a mascot. Then they headed down the mountain. When word reached Camp Four in the glacial valley known as the Western Cwm, at 22,000 feet, an enterprising young correspondent from the *Times* of London named James Morris (later Jan Morris), who had traveled with the expedition, descended quickly to the Everest Base Camp. Morris wrote a message in code to shield it from competitors, and a runner carried it on foot to Namche Bazaar. There an Indian police officer sent it by wireless to the British consul in Kathmandu, who relayed it to London. *The Times* published the scoop on the morning of June 2—four days after Hillary and Tenzing reached the summit, and the same day that Queen Elizabeth was crowned at Westminster Abbey.

In the sixty-seven years since then, about four thousand people have reached the summit, and while the achievement still confers bragging rights on those who make it, it has lost much of its novelty. "I was asked about the photo [taken by Nirmal Purja] when I came back," the Austrian climber Reinhard Grubhofer told me last August. "People said, 'Oh, you've also been queuing up there,' like it was the supermarket." Grubhofer, like many other mountaineering purists and Everest veterans I have talked to, hopes that the Nepalese government will enforce the new permit protocols it established last year and restore the slopes of Everest to a more pristine state, though he has his doubts.

In any event, the results won't immediately become clear. In mid-March 2020, amid the worsening coronavirus pandemic, both Nepal and China closed Mount Everest for the season, the first time this has happened since a massive avalanche killed sixteen Sherpas on the Khumbu Icefall in 2014. The new rules won't be tested until at least 2021.

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Confinement and Contagion

Justine van der Leun

Johnson Family/Joe Vanderford/Michelle Horton

From top left, Tomiekia Johnson and her daughter, Central California Women's Facility, Chowchilla, 2013; Joe Vanderford, Shakopee Prison, Minnesota, 2018; Nikki Addimando and her children, Rhinebeck, New York, 2017

In February, Tomiekia Johnson's mother, father, sister, and daughter came to Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), a state prison in the small city of Chowchilla, for their monthly visit. Tomiekia had been reading the news about the spread of the coronavirus and told her family to prepare for catastrophe. "They were...unmoved," she wrote to me in August. "They gave me the side eye. Now here we are."

On March 16, visits to the facility were paused. Tomiekia, who is forty-one, and her thirteen-year-old daughter had to make do with phone calls, punctuating their brief, monitored conversations with expressions of reassurance and affection: "You know I love you, right?" "Yeah, mama, I know." In early April, a prison nurse tested positive, Tomiekia told me, which resulted in a brief quarantine of certain units. Hand sanitizer and disinfectant spray were made available on demand, but the CCWF population, which tops two thousand, still mingled on the parched grass yards of the sprawling compound.

Then, Tomiekia wrote, "people started to realize they could die here before making it home." Panic set in. Women inside began to talk about lawsuits, anarchy, and escape plans. Tomiekia counseled others and thumped her Bible. She saw the virus, she told me, as yet another challenge—after the domestic violence she had suffered, the killing of her husband that she maintained was an accident, the loss of her career and every material possession, the trial during which she saw her character demolished, the separation from her child. "We're being tested to the ends of our being," she told me. "To the last threads of our might."

Joe Vanderford, a transgender man at Minnesota's Shakopee Prison for women in the southeastern city of Shakopee, was accustomed to feeling unmoored, a self-described "castaway." Joe, now fifty-three, had been abused and neglected as a child. Over his thirty-three years in prison for murder, he has spent a total of eight in solitary confinement, including one five-year stretch. During his time in "the hole," he caught and trained a baby mouse, which slept by his head in an empty Folgers jar, until one night he accidentally squished it. "I guess surviving loneliness and punishment is my great accomplishment and shame," he wrote. When the coronavirus began to circulate, Joe advocated for masks. "We have zero death row inmates," he wrote me, but with Covid spreading, "each prison is death row."

Nicole "Nikki" Addimando, a thirty-one-year-old former preschool teacher, was a new arrival at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York's only maximum-security women's prison. "Being in here during this pandemic is bizarre," she wrote me in late March. As in California, visits had been suspended, and Nikki did not know when she would see her five-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son again. When she was in county jail, they had seen one another every week for an hour. But once Nikki was transferred to Bedford Hills in February, she hoped for longer visits: the prison had a playroom, and children were allowed to stay for an entire day. Instead, everything shut down. "More isolation," Nikki wrote. "Further removed from the world and what's going on outside of these barbed wire fences." Some mornings, she looked up at the moon as she walked across the grounds, and it reminded her that she was "still on this earth. But I feel a million miles away."

On March 10, the day before the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic, I rented a car to visit Bedford Hills, some forty miles north of Manhattan. The radio buzzed with talk of Chinese cities shutting down, Italians lying in hospital hallways, infected cruise ships. That day, Governor Andrew Cuomo had ordered a "containment zone" around a suburb about thirty miles south of the prison. I wiped the car down with bleach before I got in. But at Bedford Hills I saw no precautions, other than some posted signs recommending hand-washing and listing symptoms, such as fever and cough.

I was there to see a woman I'd been corresponding with, a young mother. She had been ordered to clean a trailer where a visitor from a county with an outbreak had spent time, she said, shrugging. Had she been provided any protective equipment, I asked—gloves, maybe? She shook her head. "Wash your hands really well," I counseled, but she was confined, along with dozens of others, to a communal unit with a shared bathroom, usually thick with cigarette smoke. After visitation ended, she had to undergo a routine strip search. I walked to the parking lot. There was a shift change. I followed the guards through the gates, bare hand after bare hand pressing against steel.

The virus may have already been circulating inside. Though the first case was reported in New York on March 1, epidemiologists now think there were already thousands of cases in hotspots. Two incarcerated women with whom I communicated believe the infection was introduced into Bedford Hills by a civilian commissary employee who, coughing, dispensed shrimp noodles and tampons, Kit Kats and toothpaste. Typically, after their shifts, commissary workers met up with friends on the yard, moved in and out of their units, the chapel, the cafeteria. People in women's prisons share food, makeup, clothing; fight, talk, and hold each other for comfort or for romance. Within ten days of my visit, Bedford Hills was closed to visitors, and all nonessential businesses statewide were shuttered.

Over 230,000 women and girls are held in US correctional facilities, a more than 750 percent increase since 1980. As of 2017, Black women were incarcerated at nearly twice the rate of white women. Women who identify as lesbian or bisexual are represented in jails and prisons at a proportion that is eight to ten times greater than in the US population. Incarcerated transgender people can be housed based on the sex they were assigned at birth and not their gender identity, which proves especially harmful for trans women held in men's facilities. According to one study, incarcerated trans people are sexually victimized at rates nearly ten times those for incarcerated people in general.

Eighty percent of incarcerated women are mothers. As of 2016, more than five million children in the US had at some point had a parent in prison. A child's risk of entering the foster care system, already high when a father is incarcerated, soars when a mother, often the primary caretaker, is detained.

I have spent nearly two years corresponding with hundreds of people held in women's facilities across the nation to understand their pathways into the criminal legal system. Soon after my trip to Bedford Hills, I began checking in with incarcerated people I knew and reaching out to others to track how they were affected by the coronavirus. I sent messages mainly through Aventiv or Global TelLink, leaders in the $1.2 billion correctional telecom market. Messages, which are limited in length, can cost up to forty cents each to send—rates that are especially unaffordable to those in prison, who are either forced to work for free or else paid wages that, in some states, start at four cents an hour.

In many prisons, censors scan every correspondence going in and out of the institution. Of the thousands of letters and e-mails I have sent to incarcerated people since 2018, some disappeared entirely or arrived weeks late. I was never alerted when one was rejected. The listed rules were vague: messages judged to threaten the "order of the institution" or impede a person's "rehabilitation" could be blocked. Still, between March and September 2020, I corresponded with eighty-eight people in twenty-six women's prisons in nineteen states, received over six hundred e-mails and twenty-five letters, and conducted twenty-one phone interviews. Almost everyone responded. They wrote, called, and wrote again. The writing itself seemed to carry urgency.

Because conversations about mass incarceration usually focus on the more than two million men behind bars, women in prisons are especially marginalized. A 2020 US Civil Rights Commission report found that women face harsher treatment and restrictions because the system does not adequately take into account gender differences, and that sexual violence committed by staff is pervasive. Prisons may not provide enough sanitary products during a woman's period. Just under half of US states permit women to be restricted or shackled during childbirth.

The coronavirus has made those in women's prisons still more vulnerable. "The world at large has forgotten us," one woman wrote from Texas. "We are the most disempowered and despised population," another wrote from Arizona. A woman in Kansas reported that within weeks of the declaration of a pandemic, ten body bags were delivered to the prison: “Guess we will not be going to the hospital if it comes here.”

When the coronavirus began to spread, doctors, health officials, advocates, and attorneys appealed to governors and public officials to issue broad releases from prisons and jails, especially for incarcerated people who were fifty or older, pregnant, or in ill health. On March 16, Dr. Amanda Klonsky, a prison educator, wrote a *New York Times* op-ed laying out essential steps for handling the pandemic in detention facilities, which included the release of elderly or infirm people, a general reduction in jail populations, staff training on the prevention of transmission, widespread testing, and quality medical care for the ill. “To do anything less than all of this—out of hate, apathy, or spite—will endanger us all,” she wrote.

On March 27, Cuomo ordered the release of up to 1,100 people held in jails, where individuals are often detained before trial. Still, throughout the spring, Rikers Island Jail in New York City—called “the epicenter of the epicenter” by the president of the corrections officers’ union—was a den of the virus. In an affidavit, a Rikers Island social worker swore that officers were brought in daily in buses that were never wiped down and that they disregarded social distancing and mask guidelines. Her incarcerated patients wore “dirty or torn masks,” and hand sanitizer and soap dispensers sat empty. Those who drafted policies, the social worker noted, worked from home, “safe and sound and far from the reality of the situation. . . . Perhaps that is why the execution and enforcement of these protocols remain aspirational and so blatantly estranged from what is happening on the ground.”

Approximately 90,000 people are behind bars in New York State. And while some jails across the country saw a decrease in populations—due largely to decisions made by local authorities—most prison populations barely budged. This is because when public officials granted early discharge, it was often for people who met specific criteria, largely those with nonviolent offenses who were nearing their release date. Cuomo, for example, decreed that pregnant women with fewer than six months left could be released: eight were eligible.

The fixation on “nonviolent criminals” was politically shrewd, since the public is generally opposed to the liberation of people they perceive as dangerous. But seen as part of the larger conversation on mass incarceration, it made little sense. “That narrative of the nonviolent offender is disconnected from medical and criminological truths,” Nazgol Ghandnoosh, a senior analyst at the Sentencing Project, a research and advocacy organization focused on reducing incarceration, told me. “We know older people are especially at risk of Covid, and because of lengthy sentencing, most older people in prison were convicted of violent crimes long ago. We also know that when they are released, these individuals pose some of the lowest safety risks to our communities.”

Roughly 20 percent of women incarcerated in the United States have been convicted of a violent crime. Five percent have been convicted of murder. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, a criminal justice reform organization, up to 88 percent of women in prison were abused prior to incarceration. “I have yet to meet a person who hasn’t been physically or sexually abused,” Kwaneta Harris wrote me. She is serving fifty years to life in Texas for killing a boyfriend she says assaulted her. Like Kwaneta, many women convicted of murder killed an intimate partner or family member; in many cases, that person had physically harmed them.

In my research, I have found that the vast majority of such women were failed by the system that later condemned them. Lisa Jackson, for example, lives in Kwaneta’s unit. She wrote me that when she was twelve years old, she reported to the police that she had been beaten and raped. In court, she wrote, she was deemed “unreliable” because she had been involved in fights at school and took psychiatric medication. The case was dismissed, and the perpetrator walked free. Years later, as a single mother struggling with substance abuse, Lisa received a twenty-year sentence for robbery.

As the summer dragged on, temperatures in Texas rose above 105 degrees, and Lisa and Kwaneta began to bathe with soap and water warmed in electric kettles to avoid contact with guards and communal showers. Lisa had an underlying health condition. “I am living my worst fear,” she wrote. “To die in prison.” By early September, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice reported 20,647 Covid cases and up to 186 deaths in the incarcerated population.

“The tragedies we suffered as little girls and young women groomed and doomed us to this current state of modernized slavery,” wrote Sandra Brown, a forty-eight-year-old Black woman serving twenty-two years in Illinois for a killing she says was in self-defense. “I have been the recipient of acts of violence since I was a child, and the law was virtually nowhere to be found. But the one time I fight back because I am afraid for my life, I am now a ‘violent offender.’”

Nikki at Bedford Hills testified in court that she was raped at five. The rapist abused others and eventually moved to Florida. As an adult, Nikki was assaulted by her partner, who tortured her, including sexually, for years. In 2017 Child Protective Services checked on the family after an anonymous caller reported that “on a weekly basis, the mother has had visible bruises to her face and chest.” According to Nikki’s testimony, following the CPS visit, her partner forced her to have sex and pulled a gun on her. They struggled and she gained control of the weapon. He threatened to kill her and himself, which would orphan their children. “I took one step and I lunged and I pulled the trigger,” she testified. “I was thinking if it didn’t go off, I was gonna be dead anyway.”

Before the killing, multiple state agencies had identified or assessed Nikki as a victim: CPS had visited less than a day before the shooting; the district attorney’s office and two police departments investigated attacks on her; she received counseling at a victims’ services agency and an organization for domestic violence survivors; two state-certified forensic nurses at the local hospital recorded and photographed her injuries after rapes and beatings. Following the shooting, medical records and graphic images of Nikki’s abuse were entered into evidence. But a prosecutor told the court that Nikki was a “master manipulator” who may have “self-inflicted” vaginal prolapses, burns, and deep bruises. The judge stated that Nikki may have “reluctantly consented” to sex acts, found her ineligible for a law intended to lessen the terms of some domestic violence survivors, and sentenced her to nineteen years to life.

Tomiekia, in California, had worked as a 911 operator and then graduated at the top of her police academy class before becoming a California Highway Patrol officer. She was a bowling league champion and a devout churchgoer. When her husband beat her, she told no one; she was ashamed. In 2009 Tomiekia reported that her husband attacked her and that, as they both groped for a gun in her purse, she shot him in what she insists was an accident. After her conviction, her bewildered father told reporters, “She overcame all the obstacles that a Black person can overcome.”

Tomiekia regretted pursuing a career in law enforcement. Officers who shoot unarmed Black civilians are often defended by their colleagues, prosecutors can decline to bring charges, and grand juries rarely indict. In contrast, Tomiekia wrote me, she went from “beloved poster child to enemy number one . . . quick as Superman’s outfit change in a phonebooth.” She felt ostracized at work, a prosecutor spent years building a case against her, and a judge handed her two life sentences. “I wish I had known the system is a colonist pipeline that preys on the weakest, poorest, underserved, undereducated, marginalized people, mostly Black, in America,” she wrote. “I was working as a first contact of the pipeline while simultaneously the demographic it was designed to imprison.”

Joe Vanderford was designated female at birth, and the state of Minnesota calls him by the name on his birth certificate. He says he was sexually assaulted by his father and another family member from the time he was a young child. “That is why my insides are screwed up (not just emotional),” Joe wrote me. “They gave me beer and surprisingly didn’t kill me with penetration.” Joe says he also saw his father beat his mother, a Thai immigrant. His father later shot himself outside Joe’s childhood home.

In 1987 Joe—nineteen years old, pregnant, and suicidal—killed an exboyfriend he felt had abandoned him. Despite having learned of Joe’s difficult childhood, a foreman said the jury could find no “mercy,” and a judge sentenced him to life in prison. Joe has developed painful arthritis. He has expressed deep remorse, taken college classes, published short fiction and poetry, and worked as a facility baker. On Mother’s Day this year, saddened that the women at Shakopee could not celebrate with their children, he made fifteen pans of apple crisp and wrangled permission to add pink whipped cream as a special touch. “It took two extra hours to put the cream in tiny cups,” he wrote me. “If you don’t portion control, it’s a dormant riot.” The parole board has denied him release four times, but he plans to try again in October.

As the coronavirus spread, conditions in prisons, already dismal, began to deteriorate further. Each correctional department came up with its own policies, but infections were inevitable because jails and prisons create the very conditions that fan the spread of a virus. “Incarcerated people were sentenced to the care and custody of the state, but the state does not have a plan to care for them while in custody,” said DeAnna Hoskins, the president of JustLeadershipUSA, an advocacy organization focused on lowering the number of people in prisons and jails. “This population is thrown away.”

Normally classes, religious gatherings, exercise regimens, jobs, volunteer-led programs, and visits with loved ones help incarcerated people organize their days, prepare to rejoin society, and cope with the mental illness that afflicts more than half the population. With the onset of the pandemic, nearly everything stopped. In Pennsylvania, some people received coloring books to pass the time.

Food quality declined, women told me, and commissaries were decimated. Chow halls closed, and bag lunches were delivered: “One peanut butter and jelly sandwich with sour macaroni salad” for dinner in Pennsylvania, a “hard hot dog weenie” in Texas, “expired milk” in Kansas. In Florida, women took pills they got on the black market to sleep the days away. In South Carolina, a woman reported that a “girl from my living quarters tried to kill herself . . . she carved into her chest and with blood smeared ‘I love you’ on a wall. . . . I’m glad I practice mindfulness meditation.”

The lockdowns meant that people were closed in their units—and sometimes in their cramped cells—for as much as twenty-three hours a day for weeks or months at a time. In their free hour, they often had to choose whether to stand in line for the showers or the phones. In Florida, one woman wrote that the “stress is so high that you can almost see it when you walk through the door.” In Pennsylvania, a thirty-eight-year-old woman who had never before received a disciplinary offense told an officer who woke her with a flashlight, “I’m gonna take that light and put it in your ass.” In New York, one woman hit another with a hot pot during a dispute over soggy cereal. “If this wasn’t real, it’d be funny,” wrote a witness to the incident, who watched as both victim and assailant were led away. They soon returned: solitary was full.

During the pandemic, the number of individuals in solitary or lockdown rose from 60,000 to 300,000 in about one month. Across the country, prisons used solitary—cells normally reserved for punishment and security (and unofficially for retribution and mental illness management)—as a form of medical isolation. At Shakopee, an incarcerated woman named Elizabeth Hawes told me that guards escorted a friend of hers, an eighty-seven-year-old woman nicknamed Grandma, to a segregated cell, ostensibly for her own protection. Though Grandma had not broken any rules, guards did not allow her any belongings. “They didn’t let her bring her tablet, which she likes to play games on,” Elizabeth told me, near tears. “There’s no TV there. It’s cold up there.” Nicholas Kimball, communications director of the Minnesota Department of Corrections, wrote to me that “it’s certainly possible something happened in a way that it shouldn’t have early on. But medical isolation for Covid protection is not a punishment and isn’t viewed that way by our agency.”

Schwanika Patterson, a twenty-nine-year-old at Bedford Hills on a burglary conviction, said that her time locked away while battling Covid was “the worst thing I ever went through in my life.” She worked at the commissary where women told me that a civilian had come to work sick in March. In early April, Schwanika began to have trouble breathing. She asked an officer to take her to the medical unit. “He called at least seventeen times,” she said, but nobody picked up. Eventually, Schwanika was escorted to see a nurse, given a breathing treatment for asthma, and sent back to the sixty-cell unit.

Two days later, Schwanika described her head aching, her ribs “closing in, making a fist, like my bones intertwined.” She was swabbed for Covid and placed in a remote room, without her tablet, pen, paper, phone access, or soap: “I felt like I was dying, and nobody was helping me.” She received a positive test result and, after five days, kicked at the door until, to her surprise, it swung open. Once in the hall, she sank to the floor. A sergeant approached and knelt down beside her. “I miss my mom,” Schwanika told him. The sergeant arranged for her to get her tablet and some soap, and to make a call. Later, Schwanika told me, he fell ill, too. By September, more than 25,000 correctional workers nationwide had tested positive.

In April, Darlene “Lulu” Benson-Seay became the first woman to die of Covid-19 in New York State custody. Lulu was incarcerated at Bedford Hills for killing her abusive partner. She was sixty-one, recovering from open heart surgery, and working on her commutation application. When she fell ill, she hid her symptoms, scared to be taken somewhere strange. “It is just a little cold,” she wrote to her sister on April 5. Two days later, she was transferred to the hospital. On April 28, after doctors determined she had no chance of recovery, she was removed from a ventilator. Before Lulu died, her sister asked a doctor to arrange a video call so she could see her one last time. A prison guard stationed outside the room would not allow it.

The experience of incarceration itself can sicken people. Tabitha Maynard, who has been in Michigan’s Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility for nearly two decades for killing her sexually abusive father, wrote that the prison health care center had been nicknamed “death care” long before the pandemic. The facility saw multiple outbreaks of scabies. In April one woman from Huron Valley messaged me about Covid symptoms and then stopped responding. Twenty days later, she wrote that she had tested positive and been moved with others to what she called a “warehouse,” with two portable showers. “We was on our own,” she wrote. “Anything we need, we had to write down and put in a milk crate. No one would step foot in the building.” Chris Gautz, the public information officer for the Michigan Department of Corrections, wrote that “it would not be true that prisoners were left in a room alone unattended.”

In early May Krystal Clark, a mother of four serving seventeen to thirty years for driving a car during an armed robbery, called me from Huron Valley, coughing sharply and crying. It wasn’t Covid-19, she said, but chronic illnesses of the heart and lungs that were exacerbated by a lack of medical care and black mold. If you peered up through a missing ceiling panel, others at the facility confirmed, you could see a dark, thick, gooey substance growing inside the walls, the same substance that coated the showers, so profuse that tiles peeled up and bricks disintegrated. After a decade inside, Krystal slept sitting up in order to breathe. A message from the administration e-mailed to the Huron Valley population told them to inform “healthcare if you have symptoms or are feeling sick. Or if you see someone else with symptoms.” But when Krystal, who was kept in a two-person cell, told an officer that her new cellmate had “no sense of taste or smell,” she wrote me, he told her not to “bother him with that bullshit.”

The rules of social distancing clashed with the reality of prison, which allowed for arbitrary regulation. In New York, a woman wrote that one day she and other prisoners were written up for covering their faces, using masks fashioned from pantyliners and rubber bands. The next day, they were required to cover their faces and, since the shipment of state-issued masks had not arrived, were encouraged to craft their own, out of, for example, pantyliners and rubber bands. In California, a woman reported that incarcerated essential workers, including those who cleaned medical and quarantine areas with Covid-positive patients, shared rooms, sinks, toilets, and showers with others. In Texas, where infection rates soared over the summer, two women in separate housing units independently reported that staff and incarcerated people alike refused to wear masks, claiming to be “protected by the Blood of Jesus.”

The majority of people who wrote to me remarked on the absurdity of trying to enforce social distancing in a prison. On March 25 at Florida Women’s Reception Center (FWRC), Kristen Wagner reported that people were marched at a six-foot distance to a chow hall, yelled at to sit on every other seat, threatened with pepper spray, and then marched back to their dorms, where they slept two feet from their bunkmates. “What is administration thinking? That we can only contract the virus from each other while we eat? This is the kind of incompetence that’s going to kill us.” By early September, at FWRC, at least one incarcerated woman had died of Covid-19 and 484 had tested positive.

In Missouri’s Chillicothe Correctional Center, Lucille Duncan, a fifty-four-year-old domestic violence survivor with asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and atrial fibrillation requested a mask and was denied one on April 3. On April 16, she wrote that the incarcerated population and guards had been provided with masks, but that they were optional. Governor Mike Parson had repeatedly said that mask-wearing was a matter of “personal responsibility” and choice, and had appeared, barefaced, at indoors events packed with elderly citizens. He reopened the state on May 4. The prisons, following suit, performed widespread testing beginning in late May and, when there were no new positive cases at Chillicothe, lifted restrictions. “Great job, everyone!” Anne L. Precythe, director of the Missouri Department of Corrections, wrote to staff on June 12. By June 25, an incarcerated woman wrote me to say that she had been notified that a Chillicothe employee tested positive for Covid-19. On July 13, Lucille reported that people were being moved around the facility without any apparent rationale. By early September, twenty-seven staff members and 252 incarcerated people had tested positive.

The movement of people within the prisons was an effective way for the virus to spread, but equally dangerous were new arrivals. Shortly after the WHO declared a pandemic, some states halted transfers from county jails and between prisons—but soon enough, many started back up. On April 3, less than three weeks after suspending non-critical inmate transfers, Florida prisons resumed intakes, even as daily cases in the state rose to more than a thousand.

Any individual transferred into an institution would be “placed on a 14-day quarantine limiting movement and interaction with the general inmate population except in emergencies,” the Florida Department of Corrections promised. But on April 16, Demetria Mason wrote me from Homestead Correctional Institute in Florida City, where she was serving ten years for a robbery, “We got a shipment of approximately 30 to 35 women . . . not one has been checked for symptoms and when the nurses come around they just ask if you are having ‘flu-like symptoms.’” Within the month, *The Miami Herald* called Homestead a “Covid-19 hot spot.” On May 26, Demetria wrote me, “death is sitting on my stomach.”

Demetria tested positive and was taken to a large, open dormitory filled with approximately sixty-five others. It smelled of mildew and bologna. Hives blossomed on her neck. One woman was vomiting blood, and “the staff just told her it’s part of the virus.” Demetria’s head and body ached, and she felt dirty: government-issued soap was in short supply, and her family members, short of funds, weren’t topping up her commissary account. When Demetria could sleep, she dreamed of her mother, who had died about a year earlier. Her mother had never acknowledged the sexual abuse Demetria suffered throughout childhood, but she had fed needy neighborhood kids and had never let Demetria or her sister “go without a Christmas, birthday, Thanksgiving, and telling us she loved us at night.” Demetria also dreamed of being reunited with her son. “Being a prison mom . . . is the hardest pain that I’ve had to endure. I will spend five more years of my life with my predator if I could just have all the time I’m away from my son back.”

By June 26, the *Miami Herald* reported that two women in the facility had died; within months, nearly 16,000 people held by the Florida Department of Corrections would test positive for Covid-19, the second-highest rate in the nation, and 107 would die. “I’m mad, then very sad,” Demetria wrote. “I feel like this will be my last place of stay.”

I reached spokespeople for the departments of corrections for the states of California, New York, Michigan, and Florida, as well as for New York City. They mostly declined to answer questions about specific conditions in their facilities but gave extensive information about the ways in which they were working to implement safeguards.

According to the Marshall Project’s Covid tracker, as of September 5, more than 115,000 incarcerated people throughout the country had tested positive for Covid-19, and at least 973 had died. But in many places with infections, there had been no widespread testing, or it had occurred weeks or months into the spread, suggesting that there had likely been earlier cases, and that fatalities may have been attributed to “natural causes.” Between March and August, of the twenty-six prisons I’d followed, twenty reported positive cases, ranging from two people at Taconic Correctional Facility in New York to 484 at Florida Women’s Reception Center.

In April several women from Nikki’s dorm at Bedford Hills were taken to the medical unit and did not immediately return. Within days, Nikki’s head began to pound, but she didn’t complain. She kept up her daily calls to her kids. Finally, in August, visitation reopened, with masks required, new screening procedures, and a limited number of people allowed in. The family was reunited. “They’ve grown so much,” Nikki wrote me. “I found new freckles on their noses, new beauty marks on their arms.”

Joe, in Minnesota, was fixated on preparing for his fifth parole hearing as Shakopee saw its first cases of the virus in July. The prison is located about thirty miles from the spot where George Floyd was killed by a police officer in May, setting off nationwide protests. Joe theorized that the murder exposed Minnesota’s “under the surface” bigotry, which extended to him. “I feel as if some of the guards would kill me if undetected . . . and feel no guilt,” he wrote. He gathered what he called a “small stash” of masks. His hands were cracked from constant scrubbing. He felt he could only count on himself for protection. Parole, he wrote, was like a “lotto, you can’t help but get your hopes up.” He wished to “salvage a little of a life.”

In California in August, cases were rising. Units around the one Tomiekia was assigned to were locked down, and a growing number of people tested positive. One woman wrote to me that temperatures topped 107 degrees inside. Another reported that the tap water was running warm. People who had been exposed to the virus were being rounded up and removed from their regular housing. Tomiekia had faith that God would bring her “out of the circumstances shining,” she told me. Still, late at night, she sat in a corner of her cell, “where no one else sees me, no one else knows,” she said. “I try to cry quietly.” □

—September 10, 2020

This article was completed in partnership with Type Investigations. Reporting was contributed by Nina Zweig.

LETTERS

DEMS MUST PLAY OFFENSE

To the Editors:

Joseph O'Neill produced two excellent essays on contemporary American politics: "No More Nice Dems" [*NYR*, December 19, 2019] and "Brand New Dems?" [*NYR*, May 28, 2020]. Both should be essential reading for those of us in the attentive liberal public, but even more so by every Democratic candidate as well as the advisers and organizers behind them.

My concern, however, is that many may interpret his prescriptions in "Brand New Dems?" too literally—that the weaknesses of the Democratic Party O'Neill so cogently describes can be remedied exclusively through the efforts of a present-day Don Draper devising killer slogans on his office couch.

Don't get me wrong: the Democrats desperately need killer slogans, particularly those extending from a compelling new brand. But as a business executive, I'm reminded that the best brands I've seen developed come from companies with clear identities of who they are and clear visions of what they want to do.

The solid Republican brand to which O'Neill speaks reflects such clarity in the party's identity and vision. They are the confident, aggressive protectors of the advantages enjoyed, and prejudices maintained, by constituencies whose interests and status are challenged by the contemporary global economy and increased diversification of American society. Republicans envision a delegitimized and disabled public sector, as only government has the power to abridge existing privileges and accelerate the continued economic and societal transformations. This identity and vision gestated under Barry Goldwater, was popularized with Ronald Reagan, got effectively implemented by George W. Bush, and is exemplified by Donald Trump.

In contrast, the shapeless Democratic brand deplored by O'Neill reflects the party's amorphous identity and vision. They lived for years off the remnants of the New Deal and Great Society, attempted Clinton-like pivots, and then struggled to expand "Hope and Change" into a coherent agenda that extends beyond health care. A new Democratic identity declaring itself the party of a vibrantly diverse twenty-first-century America—with a new vision based on the belief that government can be a positive force capable of addressing such contemporary imperatives as climate change, economic inequality, criminal justice reform, women's rights, and affordable health care—would be vital contributions to O'Neill's rebranding requirement.

Edward Hamburg
Chicago, Illinois

Joseph O'Neill *replies*:

Edward Hamburg's thoughtful letter in effect asks two good questions: Is PR enough? Shouldn't the Democratic Party's identity foreground a clear ideology?

Taking the second question first: I argue that the Democratic Party's public ideological identity is already the one he describes: "The party of a vibrantly diverse twenty-first-century America—with a new vision based on the belief that government can be a positive force capable of addressing such contemporary imperatives as climate change, economic inequality, criminal justice reform, women's rights, and affordable health care." This identity is descriptively fine, even inspiring; but it doesn't add up to a strong party brand. It doesn't durably attract low-information apolitical centrists, nor does it consistently inspire the trust and loyalty of the party base. If it did, we wouldn't keep losing elections we shouldn't lose. The Republican Party wouldn't keep winning elections it shouldn't win.

A brief answer to Hamburg's first question would be: in the matter of negatively branding the GOP, vigorous PR—that is, an effective negative branding operation—would go a long way toward making the GOP more beatable and real progress more achievable. The mystery is why so many Democrats, whether on the left or right of the party, don't understand this. In the matter of improving perceptions of the Democratic Party in the eyes of its own supporters and potential allies, PR is nowhere near enough. I argue that what's required is very substantive: a party committed to using its power to do the will of Democrats, notably the grassroots activists who deliver the votes, and the donations, needed for victory. Again, it seems not to occur to many Democratic officials that their job is to act in such a way as to make Democrats happy and Republicans unhappy.

But what makes a Democrat happy? What does being a Democrat mean? Who should be a Democrat? These are vital questions that merit urgent, deeper investigation. Inevitably, any answer will to a degree depend on the particular ideology of the answerer. But also inevitably, a good answer will reckon with our current reality, which is that the United States is largely under the control of a party intent on the destruction of American democracy. Democrats must do something different, and fast.

AN 'INVALUABLE' SOURCE

To the Editors:

Zadie Smith's interesting review of the artwork of Kara Walker [*NYR*, February 27] contains a large section on the life and diaries of Thomas Thistlewood, a slave owner in Jamaica between 1750 and 1786. She claims in a footnote that she derived her information from reading three entries in the diaries of Thomas Thistlewood at the Beinecke Library, where Thistlewood's papers now reside, having previously been at the Lincolnshire Archives in England, where I examined them and obtained a transcript of the diaries.

It is clear to me, however, from the details in her review, that her information about Thomas Thistlewood is derived from my 2004 book, *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World*. The wording of the punishments meted out to enslaved people that she notes follows very closely what I wrote on p. 261 of *Mastery* and her enumeration of Thistlewood engaging in 3,852 sex acts appears to be derived from my counting of such acts (from the whole diaries, not just the three diary entries noted in her footnote) on p. 156 of *Mastery*.

The rest of her comments on Thistlewood also seem to have been obtained from a reading of my book. I appreciate that Ms. Smith has found my book a valuable source of information. It would be nice if she acknowledged that she got the information about Thistlewood from work I have done rather than from her own researches. It is possible that Ms. Smith has read the original diaries, but my confidence in her having done so is diminished by her assertion that Thistlewood wrote about Enlightenment matters on the recto side of the diaries while he wrote about his sexual depravities and how he punished enslaved people on the verso side. Thistlewood did not, however, divide his diaries into a recto and a verso side but used both sides of his diary notebooks to write daily entries in which philosophical reflections were mixed with his activities as a slave owner.

I hope that Ms. Smith can make an acknowledgment of her indebtedness to my work on Thomas Thistlewood.

Trevor Burnard
Wilberforce Professor of
Slavery and Emancipation
University of Hull, UK

Zadie Smith *replies*:

I'm really very sorry for the omission. I placed no footnote at all on those sections when I wrote the essay. The footnotes came at the end of the process, at the request of the magazine's editors, who asked where they had come from, at which point I told them to check the wording of the quotes in Thistlewood's diaries. The footnote was theirs. I never claimed to have gone to the Beinecke Library and indeed I never have. I did, however, read Professor Burnard's excellent book, several years ago—which is when I made notes on it, evidently inaccurately in the case of the recto/verso error—and I would like to take this opportunity to recommend it to the readers of this journal. I found it to be a brilliant and devastating work, and invaluable in developing my understanding of the brutal history of slavery in the Caribbean.

Museo del Prado, Madrid

'And so was his grandfather'; etching by Francisco Goya, 1797–1799. For more on Goya, see the essay by Julian Bell on pages 10–11 of this issue.

CONQUEST AND AGENCY

To the Editors:

I applaud both Jeffrey Ostler's fine book *Surviving Genocide* and Peter Nabokov's insightful review of it [*NYR*, July 2]. Framing Ostler's work as reflective of contemporary interest in settler colonial studies (particularly its focus on the process of elimination) and genocide studies (most notably Benjamin Madley's 2016 study of California, *An American Genocide*) is apt. But missing in that framework is some recognition of the connection these two viewpoints share with the "new" Indian history of the past generation, a school of historical studies that has done so much to alter general understandings of Native history and the US conquest of North America. That older approach emphasized Native agency, tribal adaptation, and Indian survival. The argument was that American Indians were not passive victims of conquest; they were agents of history. We older scholars can feel both "chastened" and enlightened by these trends, but we continue to search for agency and to see more in the past than stories of "metal striking bone." Native perspectives and Native actions link this newer scholarship to its predecessor. They also reveal that concentrating exclusively on genocide and colonial exploitation can obscure history.

As hard as it is to imagine, there was agency amid the horrific cruelty of the past. Rapacious violence from New England to California did not produce a national "extirpation" (though to be sure, removal, boarding schools, and reservation poverty came close). And in the wake of American cruelty, Native people acted: Cherokees rebuilt their nation in Indian Territory; Navajos, freed from mass incarceration, walked back to their homeland; Ojibwe villages removed from the Minnesota landscape returned, reformed, and resisted. The point is twofold. First, the American genocide was not the product of a single policy pronouncement or government action; it was the product of history—ideas in time, distinctive circumstances, human greed, racist ideology (another human creation), and xenophobia. Second, the salvation of Native people—and of the US as well—has been a tenacious, clear-eyed tradition of resistance.

And as useful as the settler colonial formulation has been as a substitute for earlier tropes of "expansion" and "conquest," it has little space within it for Native agency. If settler colonialism is ultimately "a process not an event," as Patrick Wolfe argued, then historical events all run one way. There is no history, it seems, only doomed resistance and inevitable defeat. And yet Native leaders from the seventeenth century forward were willing to negotiate treaties, learn new languages, travel to foreign capitals, publish broadsides, and adopt new religions as they struggled to force newcomers to recognize their humanity and sovereignty.

Today's Native leaders are heirs to this long tradition of diplomacy, tribal advocacy, cultural patriotism, and dogged resistance. They inspired the survival and cultural survivance we see around us. Some might dismiss this call for nuance as a form of self-deception practiced by those who deny the cruelty of the colonial process, but Native actors have long shared that viewpoint. It drove John Ross to defend the Cherokee nation's integrity before—and for decades after—their forced removal from Georgia. It drove the Dakota intellectual Charles Eastman to declare a century ago in the darkest days of Native life, "I am an American; I am an Indian." It inspired the Paiute activist Sarah Winnemucca to travel the nation pleading for human rights for her people. And it no doubt sustained the Creek leaders who were victorious in the Supreme Court in early July.

I am pleased that Ostler's book is out there and happy that my younger colleagues are engaged with it. But I also hope that exploring its thesis does not mean "the end of history." There are many more stories out there—and many more Native voices—that demand our attention.

Frederick E. Hoxie
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